

## Chemical Neutral

By Rick Bailey

"What you do," the tree man says, "is get some Great Stuff. Fill the tree up with it to keep the water out of it."

It's an apple tree. Now it's half an apple tree. We have three of them left, all senior citizens feeling their years. Our house sits on property that was part of a large orchard in the nineteenth century. Gradually most of our neighbors have cut down their apple trees. The one now reduced to half its former self has looked haggard and dry for some time now, part of it, anyway. This year I was going to lop off a dead chunk of it. Then a storm came through the area. There were enough leaves in the tree for it to resist, but it lost its worse half. When I got up Father's Day morning, there it was, broken, half the tree bowing to the grass, and where it broke, a deep hollow in the trunk, a void four inches in diameter and twenty some inches deep. Before starting lunch that Sunday, I cut the dead wood into pieces with my chain saw and hauled them to the road.

"Don't worry about this guy," the tree man says. "Keep the water out, it'll last a while." He looks up at the tree, nods, and says, "Great Stuff."

I do not love an apple tree. We had one in our yard when I was growing up. One was enough. Every fall my brother and I picked up rotten apples and hauled them to the garden in a wheel barrow. Our parents grew a big vegetable garden. They also had rows of backbreaking strawberries and a long stand of thorny, obstreperous raspberry bushes that grew rampant and were frightfully prolific. Relatives would come, townspeople would stop by for a visit. Our mother would hand us a bowl. "Go pick Vernon and Matty a couple quarts." When the misery of nature's bounty had passed into fall, there remained the apple tree. It was tall, craggy, and usually loaded. The grass under the tree with thin and sickly. All my hatred of the garden could be invested in that beast. Eventually the tree came down and a basketball rim went up.

Great Stuff is a Dow Chemical product. It comes in a yellow can. It's under pressure. You screw a six inch tube onto a tip in the top of the can, bend the tip, and stuff the color of a pastry chef's egg cream comes squirting out. The active ingredient in Great Stuff is Great Stuff, plus air. And it is lively. I emptied a can into the tree and saw I would need reinforcements. I went back to ACE for two more cans, emptying

both of them into the cavern. Then I went in the house. When I looked out the kitchen window, I saw the tree vomiting Great Stuff in slow-mo. Stuff stuck to the side of the tree. Stuff puddling on the ground.

There should be a sign on the can. In large letters, don't touch Great Stuff.

I grabbed what I could find, a paper bag, some newspapers, a piece of cardboard, thinking I would just trowel a nice finish on Great Stuff. It is not a friend to the trowel.

By accident, I touched it. I think it touched me purpose.

It's sticky.

Forget soap and water. Only gas would take it off, which I poured over my hands at the edge of the driveway, cursing Great Stuff stuck to my hands, to my flip-flops and shorts.

That day a headline caught my attention, about the oceans being near death. The oceans, too infinite for the mind to contain, a symbol of infinity. How do we succeed in exhausting and murdering infinity? Fished out, polluted, their ecosystem destabilized by temperature change and increased carbon dioxide levels, the oceans, it is said, could be dead within a generation.

Lake Erie came to mind. The dead lake. And the Titabawassee River came to mind, its stench, its spectral clouds of steam rising from it in sub-zero temperatures, its hideous population of grimy carp we dragged up on the banks as kids, monstrous fish we recoiled from and kicked with disgust back in the water.

I've sailed on Lake Erie and eaten its perch. It's made a comeback.

The Titabawassee has experienced a rebirth. Walleye run up the river to spawn. I can't quite take it in, the walleye, the river's rebirth without birth defects. My brother said not long ago he put a boat in the river north of town and by accident (any physical contact with the river was, would be, and must always be an accident), stepped in the water. His foot broke the surface tension of the muck in the bottom, he said, and what came up was a dark smoky cloud of disturbed sediment, and the smell. The smell of dead river, the smell of Dow.

We were ten years in this house when we lost the first apple tree. It was the biggest of the four, and it was beautiful, the color and texture of its bark alternating between slate and coal, its Herculean branches rising gracefully and powerfully above the yard. Mowing the lawn one day, I noticed business around the base of the tree, ant business. When a big branch later dropped off the tree, I saw in the

hollow of the tree more than business. It was business and industry, hunting and gathering, a diverse thriving economy predicated on the destruction of the tree.

We'd had ants in the house, big fellows; long-bodied, lusty black carpenter ants that crunched when you stepped on them. Every spring and summer, we'd find them in that jolt of surprise, on the floor behind a door, on the kitchen counter. Sitting on the couch, you'd feel a tickle across your arm as one jogged over it, heading for a sofa cushion.

When I told my wife the big apple was full of ants, she was resolute.

Within a week, we had a crew in the yard. The guys came out at the end of the day. They must have figured: one tree.

The top branches came down, then the lower branches. All of them full.

When they cut the base of the tree four feet above ground, a crater was opened, and from it black ants poured, a geyser of ants, clouds of them fuming down the sides of the tree. Even the tree guys were shaken.

I grew to tolerate the apple trees. Come fall, I had to clean up after them, filling plastic grocery bags with apples, bags I then lugged to the road to be carried away on Thursdays. Apple waste. Every year my mother-in-law would look up into the trees and ask why we didn't eat them. Because they're wormy, I said. She would point way up in the tree. That one, she'd say, looks good. Yes, it was red. But no, I'd say, they're all full of worms. We would have to spray. Our neighbor sprayed his peach trees, valiantly trying to keep away the bugs, trusting the poison to do its work, and eventually he gave up on growing perfect, bug-free, poisoned fruit.

But they had become beautiful, these old infested trees. Some summer evenings, late into dusk, I'd walk the yard, enjoying the deep liquid green, and stand among the trees, silent dark hulks that seemed more than present. They seemed to give off something. I liked to think of them as possessed by spirits. They were receptacles in which wandering spirits could reside. Maybe the spirits of our loved ones, being near us. Maybe just the spirits of other trees. There was a vibration. You were with them, the trees and their occupants, you did not feel alone.

The day after I inject my apple tree with foam, I awaken to a tree with a goiter. Great Stuff has continued to boil over, though the rate has slowed and the pressure has subsided, causing it to form a

protuberance the size of a volley ball on the side of the tree. It looks like a giant meringue. Or a tumor. At first I'm horrified and sickened, then excited by the possibilities this thing offers. I could paint a face on it and call it the spirit of the tree. Or I could just leave it as it is, see what happens to it over time. Judging from the efficacy of Dow engineering, I might have to wait a few thousand years to detect any change, as I'm sure it's heat-, cold-, rain-, snow-, bird-, and squirrel resistant. The only thing to do is cut it off.

The ideal tool for this blobectomy is a drywall saw, which makes a clean excision. There is some blobdust.

I'm left with part tree, part canoli. To discolor the foam, I spare it with gray Krylon Primer. "No drips, no runs, no errors," it says on the can. I spray, Great Stuff begins to tick. I'm afraid that Dow and Krylon do not make nice, but in the end, nothing happens. That's my goal, to hold the tree in chemical neutral, give it a chance to live and die a modern death.

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