T'S APPLE DAY!" Molly thinks as she wakes one morning. A cool breeze tumbles down from the mountains, skims parched yellow grass, threads through town, and chills her toes.

"Apple Day, Noah!" The big yellow dog sleeping on the floor perks up his ears. Noah loves Apple Days.

Downstairs, the sauce bowl gleams on the kitchen table. Dad hauls the big, blackened pot out of the basement. Then he hands Molly a basket and chooses a wooden crate for himself.

"Pick enough so we can share our sauce this year!" Mom calls from the door.
Outside, the ground smells spicy. Molly and Dad’s boots dent a carpet of wet leaves. The apple orchard is a short walk away, over a field of goldenrod, under an old wooden fence. Molly knows the way well; she has walked to the orchard since she could carry only a small basket.

Long ago, when the mountains looked down on a bare, quiet valley, her grandparents planted tiny saplings in a newly cleared field. Now the valley holds a bustling town, and the trees in the orchard reach high above Dad’s head. Dad and his two sisters each built a house on the edge of the orchard. Sometimes the trees bow and bend with Molly’s little cousins, but this early morning, Molly sees only spiders weaving dewy webs between branches.

On early mornings like this, it seems the orchard has been waiting just for her. Apples cluster on branches, gleaming in the sun. “Macs,” Dad calls them, but Molly knows the full name is “McIntosh.” She imagines each apple as a plump Scottish man with a shiny red belly.
Sunlight filters through the branches, dappling Molly’s hands as she twists each stem. She is careful to pick only the best apples. Every year, her family’s applesauce is the best in Montana—well, almost the best. Last year, their jar of special McIntosh applesauce won the red ribbon at the state fair.

There’s just something missing from our sauce, Molly muses as she picks. If only they could figure out what it is, they might win the blue ribbon this year. Molly strains for an apple just out of reach and—CRASH—tumbles, dizzy, to the ground. It feels like a bobcat has wrapped his paws around her legs.

But it’s not a bobcat. It’s Sam, her messy little cousin who lives next door.

“Molly, I came to pick apples, too!” He waves an old, battered purse above his head.
Sam’s mom waves from the edge of the orchard, her hair still in curlers. Dad waves back and calls, “We’ll watch him this morning!”

“Yahoo!” Sam cheers, pulling Noah’s ears. Noah doesn’t mind. But Molly does.

“Go pick apples over there,” Molly snaps. She points to an ancient, twisted apple tree. Nobody knows what kinds of apples it grows, but they are tiny and too tart to eat.

Sam doesn’t care. He fills his mom’s old purse with them, then stuffs his raincoat pockets full, too.

Molly asks Dad for the fruit picker, a long pole with a wire basket at the end. She pushes the fruit picker into the trees and nudge the apples from their branches.

Noah sniffs and gnaws on windfalls, bruised and tunneled by worms. Sam scoops up the rotten apples and tosses them into the air, and Noah runs about in the apple rain, barking.

Then Dad calls, “Time to sauce!” Sam lifts up his bulging purse.

“I picked a bunch!” Molly sighs. She hopes Sam will stay out of the way.
At home, Dad cinches the iron clamps of the applesauce mill to the table while Molly rinses the apples.

"They're beauties," Mom says, and Molly smiles with pride. Then into the big pot on the stove they go.

Suddenly, before she can stop him, Sam shakes the purse of tiny, sour apples into the pot, too.

"No!" Molly cries, reaching into the pot to pull out Sam's apples.

"It's OK," Dad chuckles. "I know a secret about good applesauce."

Molly steps back to let Dad light the stove. "What about the state fair?"

"Don't worry," Dad says. "I don't think you'll be disappointed."

Molly isn't so sure.

While the apples soften in the pot, filling the kitchen with sweet steam, Sam bangs on the empty bowl with a spoon and belts out a song about Apple Day.

Noah doesn't mind. He drowses in the sugary warmth. Mom only smiles as she stirs the simmering pot. Dad hums along as he scoops hot, mushy apples into the top of the mill. But Molly clamps her hands over her ears. Apple Day is supposed
to be a quiet day. It is not a loud-little-cousin day.

Molly and Dad take turns cranking the handle, smashing the apples into sauce. Sam tries, too, but it is too hard for him. The sauce slips down into the bowl, golden and smooth. A pile of seeds and skin slip out the back of the mill, and Molly empties them onto the compost heap, a treat for the bees.

Finally, all the apples, even Sam’s tiny tart ones, have been made into a huge bowl of applesauce. Dad holds a spoon to Molly’s lips.

Molly screws up her mouth. She sticks out her tongue to taste just a little. Then she gobbles the whole bite. “Wow!”

Dad’s eyes twinkle. “The secret to really good sauce is making it from different kinds of apples.” He ruffles Sam’s hair. “We may even have a chance at that blue ribbon this year.”

“Who would have known that you had the missing ingredient?” Molly asks her cousin.

Sam grins, licking sauce from his fingers. “I love Apple Day!”

Molly smiles. “Me, too, Sam.”