

BENEATH THE SHELL

A bowl of peas, a bushel
of understanding

BY ANN TAYLOR PITTMAN



THERE'S A TRICK TO SHELLING peas. If you tear into a pod just right, you can pry open one seam all the way down like a zipper, revealing the seeds lined up inside. This is easiest to do with slightly dried-out pods that show the first signs of shriveling. Wait for them to get old enough to open up. Run your thumb along the length of the splayed-open pod, and the peas fall into the bowl with a satisfying percussive beat.

I learned this technique from my paternal grandmother when I was eight. That's when my older brother, Tim, and I spent a week in late July on our grandparents' ten-acre farm outside Grenada, Mississippi. Our house was in town, so this world seemed wild and exotic—tractor-furrowed rows of my favorite vegetables, a horse in a pasture, and a huge barn full of lumber and discarded machinery (including a *Star Trek*-like motherboard from the machine-coil factory where my grandfather worked for decades). Their land spread down a gently sloping driveway off the main road. It felt contained and isolated, their own private bottom.

On the first day, Tim and I played outside as long as we could, until Grandmama and Granddaddy coaxed us inside for supper. "Ben Haive," my grandfather said. "You be Ben [pointing to Tim], and you behave [directed at me]." It was a corny saying that didn't quite make sense, but it cracked us up and got our attention.

As a treat, they let us spend the night in the pop-up camper in the yard, sending us back out with sweaty glasses of cold sweet milk. We heard, or pretended to hear, the screams of what our relatives called panthers. We recounted our uncles' and aunt's stories of being stalked when they were kids, the distinctive click-clack of claws on blacktop a few paces back as they walked home in the dark. I don't know if they made these stories up to scare us, or if they really believed in them. If it was

a scare tactic, it didn't work—I pictured a cartoon Pink Panther lolling in the yard.

Grandmama and I planned to spend a day together, just the girls. At that time, I was her only granddaughter. This was special. But the idea of being alone with her filled me with dread; she was as foreign to me as I must have been to her. She was always humming gospel tunes. Her hands, the skin puckered and tenderized by wet kitchen work, smelled of onions (a clue to why her vegetables tasted so good). She was a tall, plump, deeply religious white woman who had lived near Grenada all her life—very different from my petite and slender Korean mother, the only other woman I really knew. I imagine that Grandmama searched my face but, disappointed, found no echoes of her family there.

We spent our day picking and shelling peas from the garden. My grandparents grew crowders and purple hulls and butterbeans, too. While I adored the purple hulls, I despised the crowders, which seemed muddy, too starchy, slightly bitter (the qualities that make me love them now). They also grew tomatoes, okra, corn, yellow squash, onions, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and all kinds of peppers. None of those would give us enough activity to fill a day. So peas it was, and we focused on purple hulls, my favorite.

The long garden rows offered no shade from the sun's merciless heat, but the picking went fast. That's because I impatiently grabbed handfuls of irregularly ripened pods—some inky purple and some still too green—yanking more than a few stems with them as I shoved them into a Sunflower grocery sack. Then we sat on the rusted glider in the breezeway, moving to the rhythm of the gospel music crackling from the transistor radio.

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.

Because He lives, all fear is gone.

Because I knooow-oooooh-oh He holds

the future,

*And life is worth the living
Just because He lives.*

Grandmama belted that one out like nobody's business, her voice shaky on the high notes. I would have much preferred The Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, or, my favorite from my parents' music collection, Queen. Even at that age, I found her gospel to be presumptuous and a little too instructive.

The shelling took the bulk of the day. We emptied our pods into scratched Tupperware bowls (mine green, hers yellow). After the initial attempts at conversation failed—her telling me all the goings-on in her Church of God congregation, my trying to explain what a Wookiee was—we fell into silent, concentrated work.

Grandmama shelled her peas with grace and ease. That's how I learned the trick. She never outright taught it to me; I learned because I cared enough to observe. Because of my hasty picking, many of the pods in my sack did not comply. They were too young, with strong cell walls that resisted my attempts at opening. I mangled many; Grandmama made easy work of the more mature pods she had picked. It took me at least four times as long to fill my bowl as it did her.

When she saw me grow frustrated, she told me a story: "When I was a little girl," she said, looking in the distance, "and my daddy had me crank the cream separator, it sounded like the city of New Orleans." She pronounced it "New Orlyeans," as if the second word stuck to the roof of her mouth and her tongue had to scrape it down. I had no idea what a cream separator was or what the city of New Orleans might sound like or what it had to do with shelling peas. But I loved such a poetic idea coming from such a practical woman.

I wanted to ask her about a foggy memory that, even as a child, felt dark and

ugly. It happened on Christmas Eve when I was maybe four years old. The whole extended family had gathered at my grandparents' house. Tim and I and our cousins looked out the front window at the flashing red light on the microwave tower in the distance. We knew it was Rudolph—never mind that the light blinked in that same spot every other night of the year. I heard raised adult voices from the next room and felt a tension that made my face prickle and burn. My grandmother's shrill inflection and my mother's thick accent rose above the rest.

I remember our family leaving earlier than we usually would on Christmas Eve, the ride back into town weighted with silence. My child brain could not grasp the complexity of what must have happened. Many years later, I would presume that the tension stemmed somehow from my mother's otherness, but I never knew exactly why. I still don't.

When we ran out of pods, my grandmother and I took our bowls into the kitchen. We'd worked all afternoon just for a damn pot of peas. Grandmama cooked finely chopped onions slowly in butter until they almost disappeared. If I had detected any crunch, I would have painstakingly fished out every last speck of allium from my serving. I was a picky eater, in that contradictory childlike way: I claimed to hate raw onions, but I loved the "rice" on a McDonald's hamburger.

She added the peas, covered them with water, sprinkled salt and pepper, and brought the water to a boil. I skimmed the foamy scum as the peas simmered. The finishing step, what I've come to realize is probably the most important one, was to take the peas off the stove, cover them, and just let them sit for a while. They became creamy, tender, fully seasoned throughout—absolutely perfect. That night at the table, as we ate those peas with cube steak, sliced tomatoes, and boiled yellow

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squash, I beamed at my grandmother and relished the "secrets" between us.

We repeated the pea ritual the next summer, and the next. The tradition may have only lasted a few years, but it punctuated my entire childhood. I learned to be more patient and more selective when I picked, and I got faster at shelling. I also came to look forward to this time with my grandmother, two Mississippi girls working together on a shared goal. She would recount the story of the cream separator each time, often more than once in a sitting. Maybe she knew how much I liked hearing it. Or maybe it was an early sign of the Alzheimer's that would overtake her decades later. Now, I realize she was talking about the train called the *City of New Orleans*, the separator roaring like a locomotive. But I prefer the romance of my childhood interpretation.

I love to shell peas. I find the slow, methodical work soothing, rich with nostalgia and melancholy. I can almost never find them still in the pods, though, so the ritual has faded into rarity. I often cook lady peas, and I use chicken stock instead of water. But my grandmother's method still makes the perfect pot. I've

thought about trying to shell peas with my sons, now in their early teens. I hate to reinforce gender roles, but this feels like work to be shared between women. If I ever have a granddaughter, I will shell peas with her as I force her to listen to what she will think is terrible music—bands like Pixies or Guided by Voices.

I still don't know exactly what happened that Christmas Eve more than forty years ago. I am certain, though, that my mother and my grandmother eventually came to love each other. This love was expressed in the practical, self-sacrificing way a grandmother, a mother, or a wife labors over fertile dirt with seeds, hand tools, muscles, patience, and luck to feed the ones she loves. Late in my grandmother's life, when her farm was a distant, foggy memory and an assisted living facility was home, my mother would hold her hand and soothe her. While more and more things would become less and less clear to her, in those moments my grandmother remembered my mother—her daughter who had once seemed so different but had become family. And my grandmother remembered me, insisting proudly and persistently that I had her dimples. ♡

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