Peach Cobbler

Jumping out of our car, I ran up the porch stairs, opened the screen door, and shouted, "Guess who, Grandma?" She was stringing green beans at the kitchen table. Her gray hair was up in a bun to keep the summer Texas heat off her neck.

"Well, I declare," she said smiling, "it's Little Vic," getting up to give me a hug. "Who else is with you?" she asked, with her warm, gray eyes twinkling.

"My Mom and Dad, little sister, and baby brother," I responded, as an earnest five-year-old boy does. "Grandma, I'm thirsty," I said. "Can I have some cold water from your pitcher in the frig?"

"Yes, I'll get some glasses," she replied. I opened the refrigerator door to let cool air wash over me, and reached for her full, transparent green, glass water jug. It had an aluminum screw-on lid perforated with many small, round holes, and a hinged cap that you moved to the side when pouring. I loved that water pitcher. She filled the glasses as the rest of my family entered the kitchen.

"Hi, Mama," my Dad said, after setting down suitcases in the living room. "Hello, Son, and welcome to you, Gracie. How was the drive up on this sweltering day?" she asked. My Mom gave her a hug and helped distribute the cold water. I poured myself a second glassful, now that the jar was half empty and I could lift it myself.

"Grandma, why does your water always taste so good?" I asked.

"I guess because it comes from the well," she answered. My Dad added, "Maybe it's because you're always thirsty."

My three-year old sister, Minta, responded to Grandma's earlier question, "We had watermelon at a picnic table.

"We sat in the shade and spit the seeds on the ground," I said. "They also had a big, metal bin with all sorts of soda pop bottles covered with ice. Mom lifted me up so I could see. I had a Nehi grape to take in the car."

"I had root beer," Minta said.

"It was a nice pit stop along Highway 75 outside Madisonville," my Dad said.

"Well, that's good," Grandma replied. "I made the first floor bedroom up for you, Gracie and the baby. The kids can sleep on pallets in the living room. There are fans in each room, and towels in the linen closet." I liked sleeping on those quilt pallets. It was fun, like camping out, but no mosquitoes and close to a bathroom.

"Let me help finish those green beans," my Mom offered. "Looks like they are fresh from your garden." She sat down at the kitchen table and placed my brother's cradle on the linoleum floor next to her. We only ate green beans from a can at home.

My Mom, a "city girl" from Dallas, had wavy, dark brown hair, brown eyes, and was short, compared to my Dad. He was over six feet, with blond hair and blue eyes. She said "opposites attract," and that's why she, an "extrovert," and he, an "introvert," got on so well. I asked what those big words meant.

"I'm like a 4th of July sparkler and your Dad's like the water bucket to douse the hot, spent sparkler for safety," she said. "You need both." I must have looked perplexed.

"It's like a magnet and an iron horseshoe—positives and negatives hold tight," she added.

"Oh," I said. Sometimes sparks flew, but their attraction and love for us stayed strong and endured.

"Thank you, Gracie. I'll start fixin' the rest of dinner," Grandma said. "Now, let's see. How does fried chicken, cornbread, fried okra, mashed potatoes and gravy, and peach pie sound?"

"You don't have to do all that," my Mom replied.

"It sounds great to me, Grandma," I countered quickly.

"You and your sister go outside and play now," my Mom said. "If you get too hot, you can color or play checkers on the porch. The crayons and coloring books are in the box in the living room with the baby's things." Mom was always prepared with suggestions of mostly fun things to do. I liked that about her.

"Let's climb trees!" I yelled to my sister. We inspected all the elm trees and the peach orchard, choosing the best ones.

"I'll boost you up in this tree," I said, hoisting her by the waist. Catching hold of the trunk and a limb with either arm, she placed her bare feet onto my knees and pulled herself up. I shinnied up a tree not far away and settled in nicely with my back against the trunk and legs straddling a limb. There was only a whiff of a breeze, but sitting comfortably in the shady crotch of a tree was sure nice.

"I hear those locusts, they're loud," Minta said. The cicadas, which we called "locusts," were sawing away so loudly that we had to holler over them.

"Don't worry, they don't bite," I said. Fascinated by their sound, she imitated it to perfection by a fluttered clicking with her tongue.

Thusly, her nickname changed from "Betsy Bell" to "Minto Locaz." Later, it changed again to "Bay" because of her fondness of the Baytown drawbridge and tunnel, over and under the brackish water of Galveston Bay. My sister and brother called me "Mole," or more commonly, "Big Mole." This tag came from my mishearing a neighborhood kid calling another boy a "Moe," as in the Three Stooges. I thought he said "mole." I was "Little Vic" to adult kinfolk and "Big Mole" to my siblings. My brother, Stone, inherited nicknames that altered through time, from "Stu" to "Stee" to "Blee." Afterwards, my sister affectionately dubbed him "Blee-bo."

Grandma's house had clean, tidy smells of Boraxo soap, Pinesol floor and toilet cleaner, Granddad's hair tonic, and Pepsodent toothpowder. Most noticeably, delicious aromas of country home cooking wafted from Grandma's kitchen on our visits.

Just before dinner, Granddad returned from cultivating cotton on his old, red Case tractor. A well worn, western-style straw hat, long-sleeved work shirt and long pants, and leather gloves kept the sun off when he was working the fields. I bounded down the porch steps across the yard to him as he parked and switched off the engine.

"Hidy, Granddad!" I hollered, as he climbed down from the tractor with his back towards me. I was in my cowboy outfit, of course, complete with hat, Western shirt with shiny pearl buttons, bandana and bolo tie around my neck, an open vest, jeans with chaps, cowboy boots with spurs on the heals, gloves covering my forearms, and a gun belt filled with silver bullets and holsters for my two ivory, plastic-handled cap pistols.

"Well, hello there, pard," he said, smiling. "What brings you here to these parts?"

"We're here on vacation to see you and Grandma," I replied.

He patted me on the back, and said, "Good. Let's go wash up in the house. Are you getting hungry for dinner?"

"Yesiree-bob, Granddad." I thought that's just what a hungry cowpoke would say after a day on the trail. We walked to the farmhouse together. My Granddad was slender, tall, and strong. Most of the time he didn't say much, at least not to us kids. He liked listening to the radio and reading the newspaper. Same as my Dad, but instead my Dad watched a television that he built himself. He greeted my Dad with a handshake, asking the same question as Grandma about our drive.

"Yes, not too much traffic and just enough oil," my Dad replied. "How's the weather been, any rain?"

"Hot and dry, but maybe we'll catch a spell of rain soon," Granddad said. The weather was something the grown-ups always talked about on the farm.

After he finished showering and changing clothes, my Mom helped my sister bathe and then me. As a cowboy, I watched Roy Rogers on TV, and a Western called, "Have Gun Will Travel." The star just had one name, "Paladin." I made up lyrics to the show's title song, and sang it while taking a bath: "Paladin, Paladin, where do you roam? I roam in the bathtub, without any clothes on."

We visited the farm during summers. Grandma's garden was bountiful, and fun to help her pick fresh vegetables, fruits, and flowers. She wore a sundress and sunhat, with a long-sleeved shirt and gloves. We harvested peaches from the orchard for her cobbler, or for homemade peach ice cream. We took turns cranking the iron handle on the wooden ice cream maker with ice and rock salt until it solidified. We gathered eggs from the henhouse. We picked fresh okra, which was one of my favorite side dishes that Grandma made by frying cut okra coins dipped in raw egg so her corn meal/white flour batter would stick to them in the iron skillet splattering with Crisco.

Her cornbread and hot, homemade biscuits were mighty good, too. The adults drank sweet tea from quart-sized tea glasses filled with ice made from sweet well water. They ate at the main table, while my sister and I sat on thick catalogues as booster seats at a card table for meals. When Stone was older, he joined us at the kids' table. My Mom served our plates before she joined the big people. We were all smiles because we never ate food like this at home.

"Grandma, you make the best peach cobbler in the whole world," I said, with a big grin. My sister nodded in agreement, as she put a spoonful of vanilla ice cream in her mouth to go along with the cobbler.

"Glad you kids like it," she said. She never used recipes. No matter how hard other family members tried to copy her peach cobbler, no one could. My Aunt Virgie came pretty close though.

After cleaning our plates at least once at those feasts, we'd join the adults in the living room. My Granddad turned on two rotating table fans. It sure felt good having a wonderful meal inside you, then plopping down to rest and digest. In the future, to whoever cooked any delicious meal, my siblings and I offered the ultimate compliment by saying, "It's time to turn on the fans."

I was great at "helping" Granddad with farm work.

"Come pump gasoline into the tractor, Little Vic," he said. I took ahold of a long-handled lever pushed down and pulled up repeatedly for all I was worth. The gasoline gurgled up through a hose from an underground tank into a tall, red, metal tower with a clear glass dome etched with gallon marks.

"Whoa now," he said. "You've got over ten gallons, that'll do."

"OK, Granddad. Are there any other machines that need gas?" I asked.

"Not for today. I'll let you know when another filling is due," he replied. He took the gas hose, inserted the nozzle into the tractor, and depressed the trigger. The gasoline flowed by gravity from the glass bulb into the tractor's tank.

"How about helping me with this cotton wagon?" Granddad said one late August morning.

"You bet, Granddad!" I beamed.

"Climb up in there," he instructed. I hoisted myself up into a big wagon that had chicken wire walls 12 feet high. The rectangular box was about 10 by 30 feet, mounted on a flat bed trailer with big wheels.

"Here, take this pitchfork," he said. "I'll hitch the wagon to the combine harvester. In the fields, the machine will pick the cotton bolls off the plants and blow them into the wagon. Your job is to distribute the cotton bolls evenly as it fills."

"Alrighty, Granddad!" I hollered. Off we went, with me bouncing on the flat bed. He drove into a cotton field, straddling rows; then started the combine. Sure enough, those cotton bolls

came gushing out of the blower into the wagon. Dutifully, I worked spreading the bolls out from the growing, heaping pile in the middle of the wagon's floor. After maybe four or five passes through the field, cotton bolls and I were nearing the top of the chicken wire.

"Granddad, the wagon's almost full," I yelled over the machinery's loud noise.

"Good. We'll finish this wagon load with one more pass, then return to the barn," he shouted. With the wagon brimming high with cotton, my Granddad was happy with the harvest, and so was I. What I didn't know was that simple gravity and a bumpy road would easily achieve the same outcome that Granddad asked me to do, but without companionship and pride of accomplishment.

On another visit earlier in the growing season, Granddad invited me to "inspect" the cotton. We walked to a nearby field, and stopped before entering a sea of knee-high, green cotton plants in black soil.

"We'll walk in single file down this furrow," he said. "Keep off the mounds. We don't want to step on the cotton plants. See this tall weed?" He pulled a grass-like plant out of the ground including its roots. "This is Johnsongrass. You can pull them up and throw them to the side."

"Do they hurt the cotton plants?" I asked.

"They eat up nutrients and drink water we want for the cotton. The weeds stunt the cotton's growth," he explained. We walked further down the furrow, pulling Johnsongrass along the way.

"Look at this green, healthy cotton plant," he said, pointing to one that looked the same as all the other cotton plants in the field to me. He turned over a leaf and saw some tiny bugs.

"Stink bugs. I'll have to spray to keep this field healthy," he said. "Later, it might be white flies, and then boll weevils."

"You have a lot to worry about, Granddad," I said.

"Well, we have ways to control weeds and pests, so the cotton crop will be alright, as long as we get timely rain," he said.

I touched the leaf that he had turned with my fingers. It exuded a sticky, irritating substance that Granddad said was part of its defense.

"When I help Grandma pick okra, it has the same sticky, prickly feeling," I said.

"You're right, cotton and okra are in the same family. We might make a farmer of you yet," he said.

When we visited in late summer, it was harvest time. Seeing fields of fluffy white cotton bursting from the bolls was like a fantasyland. Once, I tried picking cotton by hand. Hard-dried, black prongs of the cracked bolls lurked under the white cotton puffs. Those points were sharp as needles, so you had to be careful when picking. Even then, I bloodied fingers from their jabs, and I couldn't get all the cotton out. It was cotton that turned me against any farming fantasy. Anyhow, Granddad explained that there were seeds within the cotton balls, which had to be "ginned" out over at the Bethel mill. My Dad drove us there to see long lines of cotton wagons queued up.

The most fun I had "helping" Granddad was "driving" his tractor.

"Let's go for a ride," he said. "You drive."

"Me?" I asked. Incredulous with wonder and without waiting for a reply, I climbed up onto the tractor, where Granddad sat in the metal driver's seat. His Case tractor didn't have a covered cab; it was open to wind, dust, sun, or rain.

"Stand here in front of me and take the wheel," he said.

"OK, Granddad," I said. Taking the big black steering wheel into my hands, I said, "I can't see over the dashboard where to go."

"Don't worry, I'll look and help you turn," he said. He started the engine, pushed in the clutch, shifted a gear, and stepped on the accelerator. We lurched forward. I was white-knuckled

driving a tractor where I couldn't see where I was going. I looked down and saw his gloved hands firmly on the wheel beneath mine. I felt relieved and disappointed at the same time. After rolling down a dirt road awhile, he picked me up on his lap to see better. As we turned around to head home, I told him, "I sure like your tractor, Granddad."

Granddad and my Dad decided we'd go fishing on a Saturday morning. I was excited all week.

"Where will we fish, Granddad," I asked.

"We'll try our luck at Lake Whitney," he said.

"What kind of fish will we catch?" I asked.

"Bass, white perch, and drum, I expect," he replied.

"What do we use as bait, Granddad?"

"Nightcrawlers that you dig up down at the branch and keep in a cardboard carton," he said.

"Will you show me how to dig up the nightcrawlers?" I said. "What are nightcrawlers anyway, Granddad?"

"They're worms," he chuckled. "Your Dad used to collect them for fishing. He'll show you how."

On Saturday, we got up before sunrise "to get a jump on those fish." My Dad drove, with Granddad in the front passenger seat and me in the back. They drank black coffee from a thermos. Grandma gave me a Hershey chocolate bar for the ride. Our fishing gear was in the trunk or sticking out a back window. We hired a small boat with a trolling motor. I sat in the middle, with my Dad at the stern to steer and Granddad up front. My Dad set me up with a bobber on a cane pole.

"Hand me your carton of nightcrawlers," he said. "I'll put the first one on your hook so you see how. Then, you bait your hook afterwards."

"Thanks, Dad," I said, relieved.

My Granddad and Dad used Zebco reels. My Dad liked using a bobber, but my Granddad said he'd go after the "big lunkers" down deep, so he used a lead sinker without a bobber on his line. My Dad caught the first fish, a white perch, but it was too small to keep. I thought it was encouraging. My bobber bounced slightly a couple of times.

"Don't jerk the line," my Dad said. "Those are just nibbles. Wait for a big tug that takes the bobber under, then gently but firmly flick your wrist up to set the hook."

It was nice to be fishing with an expert. As it turned out, I didn't catch anything on my cane pole. Dad and Granddad let me reel in some fish they had hooked. That was fun. By 10 am, they stopped biting, so we headed for shore. Our stringer of "keepers" had three bass, two white perch, and one drum. We stopped at a gas station for crushed ice to keep the fish fresh in a cooler. For dinner, Grandma pan-fried fillets in batter, like she did with okra.

When I was three years old, my Granddad and Uncle R.C. (my Dad's little brother) decapitated chickens with a hatchet on a stump in the farmyard—the start of a farm-fresh, fried chicken dinner. After severing the head of a big, white chicken, the headless carcass jumped off the stump and ran willy-nilly spewing blood everywhere from its neck. Eventually its race with life was over and it fell to the ground. My Grandma picked it up and dunked it in a hot tub of water, then plucked the feathers. Afterwards, one of my most horrible, recurring childhood nightmares was a big, white chicken, like Foghorn Leghorn only really mean, brandishing an axe and chasing me.

One of my playtime haunts on the farm was an old tool shed. It had a dirt-floor, rusting horseshoes and sundry hand tools hanging on walls or stacked. It smelled like lubricating grease and old oil. Near the big swinging door to the shack, I discovered about a dozen cone shapes dug into the loose dirt. I noticed movement at the bottom of one or two. Startled and a bit scared, I stuck a twig into the bottom of one of the pits. A bug or worm appeared, and then quickly buried itself

deeper. At lunch, I asked Grandma what those critters were. She said they were "doodlebugs" or "ant lions" because they catch ants in their cone traps. Back in the shed, I dropped a grain of sand or tiny piece of chewing gum onto the side of a cone, which caused an immediate response. I figured this made the doodlebug angry, because it wasn't something to eat. It dug furiously repairing its trap, sending puffs of dirt up into the air.

There were other insects, spiders, and the like that we encountered on the farm. At twilight, my sister and I delighted in chasing fireflies.

"I'm gonna catch some in a jar and put holes in the lid so they can breathe, and keep them as pets," my sister said. With the help of my Mom to assemble her firefly house, she caught quite a few. I helped her.

"I'll put a sprig of mint and a peach twig with leaves in there so they have something to rest on and eat," she said. Despite her good intentions, when we looked in the jar the next day, all the fireflies were dead. We decided not to capture them anymore.

There were harmless, large brown "June" bugs galore, and lots of "pill" or "rollie-pollie" bugs that curled into little balls within protective armored plates when frightened, like armadillos. We encountered menacing insects, such as yellow jackets and wasps, too. Forewarned and on lookout for them, one of us got stung anyway. My Mom extracted the stinger, if needed, then put ice on the red, swollen injury. She applied a baking soda poultice or calamine lotion, and set us off again into the fray of the farmyard "jungle."

Besides black widow and brown recluse spiders to dodge, a relative of theirs unnerved me the most. Grandma asked me to go to the food cellar, which doubled as an underground tornado shelter, to fetch a jar of butter pickles. She cautioned me to "look out for scorpions down there." Wanting to please her (or anticipating another delicious meal needing this particular ingredient), I overcame my fear to go retrieve the desired Mason jar.

I fiddled with the latch on the galvanized tin door, and swung the door over onto the ground. I peered down concrete steps into darkness, where scorpions lurked. A light bulb, mounted to the ceiling, had a pull string. My Mom had the foresight to provide me a flashlight to see my way down into the pit. As I descended, the ant lions' lairs came to mind, but this time, "I'm the prey," I shuddered.

At the bottom step, I swept the floor with the flashlight beam. Sure enough, three scorpions, two small ones and one large granddaddy, lay in wait with stingers flickering, taking aim. Judging my leap carefully, I launched over them to the middle of the cellar floor. I quickly grabbed the light bulb string and pulled, all the while training my flashlight on the scorpions. Panting heavily, I stood frozen, watching the scorpions move out of the light under a bench.

Turning to wooden shelves crammed with labeled jars, I looked for Grandma's pickles. I glanced back over my shoulder a lot, knowing the scorpions would launch their attack at any moment. At last, I grabbed the prize jar. But to make my escape, I first had to switch off the light. I was most scared in that moment of darkness, except for the flickering beam of my flashlight with dying batteries, because I couldn't tell where the scorpions were. I decided my best bet was to flee, now or never. I bounded across the cellar floor and tore up the steps, with my heart pumping wildly. "I made it!" I shouted in relief to the cicadas.

Another pastime was gathering pecans fallen on the ground down at the "branch." The branch was a grove of trees with a small stream that sometimes had water in it and sometimes not. About a quarter mile from the farmhouse past a cotton field, the branch was often a cool and shady place to play.

"Put on your straw hats and shoes and socks," Mom said. "Today's a good day for gathering pecans." She handed us each a reed basket. Inside she had packed a snack of fruit and

Oreo cookies. We carried canteens of water on straps over our shoulders. "Come back at lunchtime," she added.

As we walked past the cotton fields towards the branch, we kicked a rock or can down the dirt road in front of us, or took turns looking for "cloud animals" in the sky.

"There's a scorpion with a big black stinger," I said pointing to a thunderhead.

"No, that's an elephant with one black tusk and one white tusk," my sister said. "You're still scared about jumping over those scorpions in the cellar."

We took swigs from our canteens and ate cookies on our way. When we got close to the pecan grove, we ran to pick up the nuts like it was an Easter egg hunt.

"Look at this big one!" Minta said.

"Yeah, there are lots of them this year," I said. "I like pecans, but they're hard to get the meat out."

"I like walnuts better. They're easier and taste better to me," she responded. After filling our baskets, we left them at the trunk of a tree.

"Let's soak our feet in the stream," I suggested. We took our shoes and socks off, and sat side by side on the grassy edge of the stream in a shady spot.

"What's your favorite thing?" I asked my sister.

"I like horses," she said. "What's yours?"

"Cowboys."

The morning passed by, as we sailed leaves in "boat races" in the stream, threw rocks at tree trunk targets or in the stream to see who could make the biggest splash, and otherwise idled away our summer morning in chitchat, mostly about someplace called "Disneyland." We returned to the farmhouse proud with heavy baskets of pecans.

"Mom, we want to see Mickey Mouse and go on the rides at Disneyland. You said it just opened," I pleaded.

"Can we go tomorrow?" Minta chimed in.

"We're already here on the farm for vacation. Besides, it's too far to drive to California," she said. "There are mice in the barn, and you can take turns pulling each other in Grandma's garden wagon, but ask her first." She handed out orange popsicles that distracted us.

I told Minta, "We'll have just as much fun here as at Disneyland anyway."

"We can pretend the mice turn into horses, like in 'Cinderella'," she said through orange lips.

Other times, I'd go to the branch alone. Usually I had my BB gun with me. I set empty, rusting tin cans, or bottles, or sticks on top of a log, aimed and fired from twenty or thirty feet away, like a genuine cowboy sharpshooter.

Uncle R.C. was a cotton farmer like my Granddad. Once a year, he liked to go deer and elk hunting in Colorado. For dinner one night, he brought elk steaks from a successful hunt. For grilling, he used a wood-fired barbecue pit, which he had made by cutting a steel barrel in half long-ways with an acetylene torch. As he brushed on barbecue sauce, my mouth watered in smelling the smoke from the grill. My Mom and sister thought the meat was too "gamey" for them, but the rest of us really liked it. I imagined myself as a wrangler on a trail ride, sitting on a stump near the chuck wagon, sinking my teeth into an elk steak and a side of ranch-style beans.

When Granddad retired, my uncle took over farming Granddad's place. My grandparents moved a few miles to the tiny town of Forreston. It had fewer than 300 people, mostly retired farmers. By this time, I was ten years old, Minta was seven, and Stone was five. There wasn't much to do in Forreston, except eat well at mealtime. I occupied myself by collecting empty pop bottles from local residents. I'd knock on doors and ask politely. Most of the time, they would give me a few, maybe even a six-pack of empties. I placed the bottles in a red Radio Flyer wagon and hauled

them to the small country store, the only store in town. After cashing in the return deposit bottles, I spent the money on banana bike candies, root beer or cherry syrup within small, soda pop bottle-shaped, wax containers, red peanut patty, and/or an ice cream bar.

I was proud to give Granddad a pair of "gold" cufflinks. At least they looked gold to me when I bought them at Monsanto store in Texas City as a gift for him. Grandma told me he always wore them to church on Sunday. I remember thanking Grandma often for her good cooking. It was polite manners, as directed from my Mom. For gifts when I was younger, I gave her family photos, which my Dad took with his box camera, or completed pages from a coloring book for her refrigerator.

My Granddad died in his late sixties. He was a heavy smoker. Grandma gave back the cufflinks to me, saying, "he wanted me to have them." My uncle farmed until he was in his 80s, then he died. My Dad, an injured World War II veteran, is going strong at 95 years old. All three Phillips men had kindly blue eyes and gentle smiles. My eyes were what my Mom called "hazel."

I felt easy and peaceful on the farm. I didn't experience the long, hot days of hard labor that were required. A working farmer worried about the weather for getting a good crop to pay off home, land, and machinery loans. To me, it was a great trail ride or fun-filled amusement park during childhood summers of simple, relaxed pleasures. In time, I didn't become a cowboy either.

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