

## Helping Mother Earth (or Blueberrying with Grandma)

Had I decided years ago to plot a career path that led to celebrity and fortune, I think the route there would have been via the of study camel chiropractics. Just think how many millions of these poor creatures have had their backs broken by those infamous strands of straw. There must be untold herds of hobbled ungulates eagerly awaiting some skilled hands to massage and manipulate their humps so that they can resume treading across the dunes and deserts. Ah, if I could have been the one to have exploded onto the scene to heal Dromedaries and Bactrians, I'd probably not only be retired right now, but also be Googleable, the ultimate in breathing the rarified air of modern stardom.

Alas, though, my childhood wasn't one of calculating ways to fill waiting coffers or television's air waves. No, mine was a youth of simple pleasures, when "looking ahead" most likely meant thinking about what was I going to do that afternoon. Possibly "the future" extended into the next day; the outside limit would be the coming weekend. A dime in my pocket seemed like great riches; a couple of quarters, a fortune; and dollar bills were outside of my conception.

When we were kids, we spent the summers in New Hampshire at the family's beloved cottage, the days carefree and easy. Twin Mart and I caught salamanders, swam in the crystal-clear lake, built little villages out of pine cones and sticks, read with the gluttony of a bear in search of his first spring dinner, pretended we were prancing horses, pestered my two older sisters now and then, capered about, and basically let our imaginations run as wild as the hillside brambles. Whim and whimsy were the managers of the daylight hours, directing us hither and yon until dusk and fatigue took over and settled us down for the night.

To say we had a "routine" would be about the same as averring that we could tame the gusts of wind that filled our sail (literally; we had a Sunfish, which, to our great amusement, often as not had its centerboard—not its mast—sticking straight up in the air). Yes, we went to the library each Wednesday; and yes, Dad came up from Massachusetts every Friday afternoon to spend the weekends with us (he hadn't caught onto the camel-curing idea either, so he had to work Monday through Friday); and yes, [great-great-aunt] Pansy and Uncle Clyde recurrently brought us succulent, flavorful homegrown tomatoes ("heirlooms, before the term was coined). But outside of these odds and ends of regularity, well, just try to

find us!

Having said that, there was one almost-daily holiday in our lives: a block of time with one of our revered relatives. We had the great blessing of having an older generation just a quick trot down one of the always-damp, always-cool dirt tracks or pine-needle paths. In the three storybook cottages nestled on the point of the cove lived Grandma; Pansy and Uncle Clyde; and [great] Aunt Bunny (Grandma's sister) and Uncle Raymond. We adored these fonts of wisdom, who were also endless sources of fun and companionship. Never did we tire of traipsing through the woods to see them or balk at the prospect of going for a visit.

Mom usually had Martha and I visit with Grandma or an aunt separately, because when together, the two of us tended to "speak in tongues"—our own twin-language—our words as fast and slippery as startled snakes, making it virtually impossible to understand us. So while one twin was at Grandma's, the other was at Aunt Bunny's. After a while, we would switch, trundling off to the other's place.

Spying us tripping down the road, no doubt giggling and sidetracked by newts and mysterious mushrooms, Grandma would be waiting at the door for me, if I were the one first headed her way. Had it been a pitch-black, moonless night, her bright smile would have lit the path; her warm welcome would have melted ice in February. Her enthusiasm was as unflinching as my old campaigner of a dog's was when offered a walk: despite the seemingly infinite number of times the respective scenario played itself out, both responded as though it were a rare event indeed!

Grandma would shoo me through the door and, depending upon the weather, into either the cozy dining room, warmed by the woodstove, or onto the big, breezy, wrap-around porch, with its commanding view of nearly the entire lake. While Aunt Bunny's kitchen held the smells of her unparalleled oatmeal bread, and Pansy's secreted away the tantalizing aroma of her chewy molasses cookies, Grandma's kitchen suggested warm butter and black pepper and her omnipresent iced tea with lemon, with a shadowy hint of cigarette smoke in the background. This strange olfactory concoction was comforting and soothing, and despite the thirty-odd years that have elapsed since she passed and was in the cottage, there are cupboards and corners that won't relinquish to time or fresh air their hold on her signature scent.

When I was a tot, a visit to Grandma's usually meant a rousing game of Uncle Wiggly or a couple of trips around the boards of Candy Land or Shoots-and-Ladders. No matter how often my little token was tricked by Pipsisewah, was lost in the

Gumdrop Mountains, or had to slide back to "Square 24," I was eager for another toss of the dice or draw of the card! No doubt I imagined myself as quite the wily Skeezicks when I was the first to reach Dr. Possum's house!

Boy, did I ever feel grown up when the games of chance were tucked away in favor of those of skill (or so I fancied): cribbage and gin rummy. These two pastimes were as much a part of my relatives' summer culture as were mosquitoes, perch, and Friday evening family barbecues. Drums' worth of iced tea (Grandma) and coffee (Aunt Bunny) were brewed and consumed as hands were dealt and pegs mobilized. "Fifteen-two, fifteen-four," and "a run of 4 is . . ." were mysterious incantations that, as a toddler, I longed to master. As soon as I was initiated into their meaning, they ran through my vocabulary as freely as hot maple syrup on a snow cone. (Who knows, perhaps my early proclivity for mathematics was the direct result of all my "fifteening"!)

Visiting Grandma wasn't something I ever outgrew. And while I loved my dear aunts passionately, there was a bond with Grandma that was deeper, clearer; that knit us together as snug as the bugs she wished for my sleep. Although sauciness and impertinence no doubt gained a foothold as I passed from tyke to teen, with respect to Grandma, they never secured a purchase, couldn't find me jaded toward her. There are some life lessons we learn through exposure or discovery (there is no tooth fairy); there are some we learn through experience (frogs don't turn into princes when kissed, and life can have heartaches); there are others we learn through trial and error (chocolate chips really don't make it in lemon meringue pie, but they sure do in pecan!). And there are some—if we're lucky and are able to hang on to childhood's naiveté—that we learn simply through not learning otherwise: such as grandmothers are perfect, just as they are. Grandma remained, in my eyes, an angel on earth through all the years I knew her (even still). I'm glad no one ever tried to convince me otherwise and that her unclouded glory never became another Easter Bunny!

As our aunts did also, Grandma seemed "old" to us kids, but that's not to say we didn't find all of them to be endlessly amusing, a source of great fun, and genuinely companionable. These ladies were of the generation that tucked a hankie up a sweater sleeve, inevitably had a brooch pinned on somewhere, wore a hat (and gloves, most likely) to church, and slept in "rollers." And wore a dress. Always. Sunup to sundown; hot weather and cool; sitting around the cottage or going out to lunch. Grandma even put on *lipstick*, much to the grand merriment of my sisters and me, to go to the dump! The dump: at the end of a dirt road, where we rarely saw a soul, where flies buzzed and swarmed as if trying out for a role in a

Hitchcock-esque film. But before the four of us kids could pile into "The Black Bomb," her huge, ancient, raven-colored behemoth of a vehicle, Grandma would pull from her handbag the famous (infamous?!) gold cylinder and apply a coat of the goeey red stuff—"for the chipmunks," she'd remind us!

But since all rules have an exception, so did the one of always wearing a dress. The one—and only!!—time I ever saw Grandma in slacks (or "trousers," never "pants") was to go blueberry picking. Mind you, this really wasn't a matter of "dressing down," since a blueberry outing was "big doings" in those days—a real occasion, a rite of the season. Grandma and Mom knew the most bountiful of wild blueberry patches, where the soil favored their proliferation and the sun kissed them just enough to ripen their fruits without burning them; they knew precisely when the orbs would be the inky blue of the lake's deepest pools, juicy and sweet, but just before the birds would think the same and snack the bushes clean; they knew when the morning was still cool enough that we kids in tow wouldn't complain, yet enough of it had passed to take the night's dew with it and off the berries.

In preparation for this auspicious excursion, the "berry pails" were taken down from their perches amidst the kitchen rafters and thoroughly washed and dried. I don't know what made berry pails, berry pails, but I do know that they were used only for gathering fruit, and that fruit was gathered only in them. [Note to self: ask Mom about this.] These metal relics will probably soon be long-gone, the way of dial telephones and Royal typewriters, but for now, their prominence remains secure in our family's legacy under Mom's safeguard.

The berrying adventure would begin with Grandma appearing at our screen door in her "berrying outfit," and Mom (in hers too) would herd the four of us kids into our old Army Jeep, a necessity for accessing the secret plots we sought. Once at our destination, we were each given our own pail, which was tied to our waist with an ancient cloth belt. Enthusiastically—and a bit competitively—we would select our own bushes to work, nearly salivating at the prospect of blueberry pancakes (for dinner, no less!), blueberry muffins, and best of all, Grandma's Lightning Cake with Blueberry Sauce.

Grandma and Mom could have set world records, I think, for filling their pails. How did they do it? Their fingers nimbly skimmed over the delicate clusters, gently plucking the ripe berries, leaving the little, hard, green going-to-be's on the branches and deftly sifting out the tiny leaves and twigs in one smooth movement. There was grace and beauty in the simplicity and economy of their motions, as natural to them as sucking nectar is to a hummingbird.

How could they possibly be on their third bucket, when the blueberries in mine were just starting to crawl up the sides of the pail? Would I be better off picking methodically, cleaning one branch thoroughly before going on to another? Should I randomly seize them, grabbing the clusters that caught my eye? Work top-to-bottom or side to side? Go clockwise or counterclockwise? Hmmm, it probably would help if, for every berry I put in my tin pail, I didn't pop two into my mouth, but nonetheless, would I *ever* feel the burden of a full bucket at my waist?

This past summer I was at the lake when the blueberries were just ready for gathering. Mom and I were talking lakeside, when her arm instinctively reached out to a high-bush next to us. With the same easy manner I remember, her palm was quickly filled with indigo globes, which she promptly popped into her mouth to savor. She didn't even have to glance into her hand to check for foreign matter—there would be no question of an errant woody fiber being included!

Inspired by my mother, the dog and I set forth to bring a surprise home for husband Scott (who wasn't able to join us): blueberries for his Sunday-morning pancakes. Tucked amongst the June Pink, Sheep's Laurel, and assorted scrub brush between the cottage and the lake are a respectable number of both low- and high-bushes, so with a modest-sized container in hand, my quest began. As I went for the fruits on the higher branches, Chok Dee daintily nibbled the ripe ones from the lower ones.

As they always are when I set out on this task, childhood memories were as close at hand as the jays and sparrows that scolded me for taking their lunches. Grandma's and Mom's dexterous fingers flashed in front of me; I saw the threadbare belt—greenish, a hint of its former self, faded from so many summers—that tied Mom's pail around her middle; I felt the sunshine caressing the top of my head, just like it did back then; and I wondered, as I did as a kid, just how come it was taking so long for the berries to accumulate! At this rate, I wouldn't have enough for a modest-sized flapjack, let alone a couple months' worth.

My musings, though, were more distracted by the beaver slapping his tail and the clicking of the Cedar Waxwings than by the glacial-speed with which blueberries were amassing in my tub. So when I next looked down, it seemed that my single-meal accrual had unexpectedly grown into a respectable store! It was the straw! The same straw that broke the poor camel's back was manifest in my blueberry pail! The difference: in this case, that notorious, maligned piece of wheat had actually reformed and was now working in my favor! Bring on those straws, that's what I thought! We're so used to seeing the "straw factor" as being negative, we overlook the fact that the principle can—and

does—have a flip side! This realization sent me pondering a bit further down the philosophical path: Is there a "reverse straw law"? If we remove wisps of straw piece by piece, is there a point at which the camel will be able to recover and get back up on his own, uh, four hooves, without intervention of a chiropractor? Can we remediate adverse effects through a sequence of ostensibly inconsequential actions? Food for thought, I decided, as I plopped blueberries into my mouth.

Some day when you're out rambling, I invite you to find ways to "add blueberries" or "remove straws" from the back of Mother Earth: to find small ways to help her health and to cease adding to her burdens. And to help you get on your way, there is a vast array of resources that can help you treat our planet a bit more gently. Recycle. Reuse. Repurpose. Travel lightly; trod gently. Think twice, use over . . . and over.

### **Grandma's Lightning Cake with Blueberry Sauce**

On many of the recipes I have from Grandma and Pansy, the directions are vague—amounts aren't specified; steps are all but missing (as in this case); or only brief descriptions are given. I'm sure some dishes were made so frequently that all the cook required was a glance to refresh her memory.

My Aunt Bunny made what had to be the world's most delicious oatmeal and shredded wheat breads, which many of us have tried to replicate by piecing together the scanty versions of her recipes that were orally passed along. No luck, I'm afraid.

But this Lightning Cake is pretty forgiving, so I don't think precision is a must! (By the way, it's also good with mini-chocolate chips in it or melted dark chocolate swirled through, marble-style.)

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## **Grandma's Lightning Cake with Blueberry Sauce**

### **Cake**

Combine in a medium bowl:

1 cup sugar  
1 1/3 c flour (depending upon whose version you have!)  
2 tsp. baking powder

Melt a dob of butter, the size of an egg, and put it in a measuring cup.

Break in 2 eggs and fill up rest of cup with milk

Pour liquid ingredients into dry; mix with spoon until combined. Pour into greased 9x9-inch pan.

Bake at 350° until done.

### **Blueberry Sauce**

In medium saucepan, combine 1 c sugar *and a* little water and boil until thick (can add 1 Tbl corn starch to sugar if want; will make thicker). Add grated lemon rind and a pinch of salt. When thick, add lemon juice to taste and fresh blueberries (at least a generous cup!)

Pour hot sauce over Lightning Cake.

Note: if you have extra blueberries, toss them into the cake batter.