

Born Country by Lindsey Roby

Imagine walking through a jungle of corn plants, twice your height, and smelling the fresh earthiness of the morning air. Dewy leaves slap your face as you run toward the sound of your grandfather hoeing the potatoes a few rows over. When you burst out of the corn, he stops for a break and shows you the tracks that the deer have made in the row, where they have bitten off the potato leaves for a tasty snack, and where they have...well...you know. He then puts you to work, picking fat, little worms and hard-shelled beetles off of the potato leaves. After that, you have a choice: weed the strawberries, a long and arduous task, or pick and shell butterbeans, equally as grueling under the growing heat of the sun. Why do all this work instead of playing inside like other kids, you wonder? Is it the quality time with your grandfather? The satisfaction of helping him out? Or perhaps it's just the excuse to get dirty that makes this work so appealing? You never, in a million years, guess that this is one of the best learning experiences imaginable!

The scene I have just painted for you describes a normal day in the life of me, thirteen years ago. I am a country girl. No, I am not a "redneck," and yes, I have all my teeth. When I began kindergarten, I realized that I was a little different because of my unique background, however short. But back then, I could not even begin to fathom how it would impact my life. My earliest memory is walking down rows of potato plants, picking fat little beetles and juicy worms off the leaves. In contrast, many of my friends remember sitting inside all day, watching television shows that I had never even heard of, or mastering video games that are still a challenge for me. I never had cable T.V. or video games. I had seven acres of open field and woods, and one heck of a big vegetable garden. Okay, so compared to many, our garden was tiny—somewhere between one and two acres. Though not an everyday backyard patch of dirt, in comparison to my grandfather's hundreds of acres of corn fields, it was hardly large enough to call a farm (though we always use "farm," for lack of a better term). After all, my home is not down some obscure dirt road, an hour away from normal society (i.e., running water, electricity, etc.). It happens to be plopped smack dab in the middle of civilization—right outside an upscale, white-picket-fence-style neighborhood, just down the road from a country club, a Kroger, and a YMCA. And fear not, city kids and children of suburbia! The mall is only ten minutes away, along with Starbucks and (everyone's favorite) Wal-Mart! So really, the only thing that made me different from any other kid was the number of fresh fruits and veggies growing in my backyard. And the best part was that I got to eat out of that garden! And play in its mud (though usually with consequences for uprooting the tomatoes). And weed it. And harvest it. In short, the amount of work equaled the fun. All of it, however, taught me more about life than any schooling could ever teach.

Lesson number one: love nature, listen to it, learn from it, and reap its benefits. Working outside from 7 a.m. to 3 or 4 in the afternoon, I got an earful of what Nature had to say. Without even looking up from my insufferable weeds, I could tell from the mockingbird's incessant squawking when some creature (usually my dog) got too close to its nest. I knew when the sky would open up and rain, not from watching the Weather Channel, but from listening to the birds, smelling the air, and watching the maple leaves turn their pale, thirsty bellies up towards the sky. Many people don't realize that maple tree leaves turn upside down when the air is heavy with moisture, and when birds that have been

chirping and flitting about suddenly fall silent and disappear, a storm is just a few minutes away. Generally, people travel through life never knowing these simple things. In today's world of technology, the Weather Channel tells viewers the weather and the Discovery Channel teaches viewers about nature. I know am not the only one, however, who has discovered and learned from Nature.

Take the well known author, philosopher, social critic, and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau as a prime example of someone else who was educated by the great outdoors. He moved to Walden Pond and lived for two years in isolation in the woods because he wanted to experience a realm outside society's endless routines. Early in his book *Walden*, Thoreau explains his bizarre social experiment, asserting that he wanted to "live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." He wanted to keep things simple, in the realm of Nature, so that he could "learn what it had to teach." Just as Thoreau did, philosophically and literally, I harvested the garden of knowledge seeded in Mother Nature's backyard.

"What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" asks Thoreau in *Walden*. Thoreau didn't just plant his beans to sell and eat, he wanted to learn in the process. In contrast, I treated the bean plants as a chore. As a child, I despised beans and could have cared less if they lived or shriveled up. However, as I got older, I began to see what Thoreau saw. In *Walden* he explains, "I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They attached me to the earth...." Instead of simply treating his fields as a task, he took time to analyze his actions. Looking back, I now understand the vast quantity of knowledge gained from those damn beans.

Lesson number two: Never, I repeat, NEVER underestimate the power of a bean plant! It has the capability to teach you more about life than Einstein could—without even talking. Gardening guru Larry Kloze philosophizes, "You can tell a lot about a person after they pick a row of beans.... [It] is a measure of someone's inner strength. It takes restraint and concentration and patience and understanding" (qtd. in Smith). Let me tell you, speaking from experience, he could not be more correct. There is nothing in this world that will teach a child respect and patience like picking and shelling butterbeans. This undertaking will also most likely result a lifelong abhorrence for that particular vegetable. As for understanding? Well, I guess that too. At the time I certainly understood that if I didn't pick those beans I would be on the receiving end of a serious spanking.

When faced with the daunting task of picking a two hundred foot row of butterbeans (which, on a good year, yields enough beans to almost completely fill five bushel baskets) and then shelling them, a strong hatred for the vegetable is only natural. Yet, one has no choice but to be patient. And for those of you who have never picked butterbeans, this task requires A LOT of patience as well as gentle understanding of the plants.

Picture yourself sitting on an overturned bucket, with the sun beating down on your back. Little muddy pools of perspiration form on your face, arms, and back from where you have tried to wipe dirt and sweat away. You are leaning over a row of leafy, green plants ready to pick all the fat, bean-filled pods you can see. Seems easy enough, right? Then again...perhaps not. The pods are not too easy to see. They camouflage themselves with the green leaves making them difficult to pick without tearing the plant up. If you tear the plants up, you better be prepared for some stern words from your grandfather. You have to remember to be gentle with the plant. Like most other living organisms, if you break it, it dies. And then there are no beans.

Of course, "once you pick 'em, ya gotta shell 'em," as Granddaddy used to say. Tedious would be the best word to describe the process. The quickest way to open a butterbean shell (pod) is by slicing the side and popping it open with your fingernail. After a

five-gallon bucket of beans has been shelled, it takes about a week to get the icky, green butterbean juice and grit out from under your fingernails. And since you generally pick every week, it's a long, green-clawed summer. For me, the triumph of winning shelling contests with my sisters made this task bearable.

Lesson number three: Learn to appreciate even the simplest, seemingly insignificant things that exist in this world. It is the little things that teach you the biggest lessons. Take a simple bean plant. No matter how tedious the task of picking and shelling, or how much hatred one fosters for the food, one must still respect and understand it. Kloze explains, "The bean plant is fragile: If you just bend it a little, you can break the stem and the whole leaf structure dies. You have to be kind to it" (qtd. in Smith). I realize this whole perspective sounds absurd. Be kind to a bean plant? Respect a bean plant? Understand a bean plant?! But after planting the seed, watering the little patch of dirt it is in, weeding the ground around it, and watching it grow and thrive, the plant is transformed into a life. It is a life that has blossomed to produce something which will sustain others' lives, including your own. After all, your mother will inevitably, and much to your horror, force you to eat the repulsive vegetable which you have just picked, because, alas, "Honey, it's good for you!" And she's right. It *is* good for you.

"And all the loveliest things there be, come simply, so it seems to me." My mother still recites this line from Edna St. Vincent Millay. Millay echoes Thoreau's plea to society for "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" These philosophies describe my life. Growing up, I didn't have much along the lines of the usual toys. I simply had Nature. The Great Outdoors taught me to appreciate the little things, and embrace the simple life (and no, I don't mean Paris Hilton's real version of the simple life). I learned respect, understanding, and appreciation from the beans. I learned that deer will jump any size fence you put up simply out of spite for you and your feeble attempt to deter them. I learned that the sun doesn't shine on you every day—sometimes it rains, and when it does, make the most of it. Mud is fun. I learned to endure hard work with patience and sheer determination. Most importantly I learned to live. Some may define me as a redneck, some as a tree-hugger; however, I think if you take a moment to stop, smell the flowers, look at the beauty around you, and listen to it, you may just find a new rhyme and reason to your existence.

Works Cited

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