

## My First Plum

Soft and smooth to the touch, I do not press too hard in fear of breaking the purple skin. The asymmetrical shape resembles the work of a craftsman, a rare quality one does not want to destroy with a selfish bite. The temptation is overpowering and I am forced to act on my desire. The ripeness is shown in the fruit's deep red color and interminable flow of its sweet juice. The taste envelops me. Why did I wait until now, when I am practically an adult, to try this? I do not understand why I never took advantage of the plum tree in my backyard that would have provided many afternoon snacks, a cool refreshment from days of long, hard work. I am now able to understand why my dad was so avid about picking the plums when they first became ripe. Seeing his short arms reach for the tallest branches is one of the most comical sights I have seen, an image that I have retained throughout my childhood. My dad refused to surrender in his mission of trying to grab those plums that were just out of reach, for he was convinced the best ones could be found at the highest point of the tree. Even when he finally reached the plums for which he had aspired, he still exercised extreme discrepancy. "This one isn't the right color...this one has a spot...that one is too small." I never understood the importance of these qualities in a plum until I took that initial bite and learned perfection is essential. My job was to stand next to the tree and hold the paper grocery bag into which my dad placed the selected plums. Bag after bag, summer after summer, altogether we must have collected a thousand plums, each one perfect in every aspect. When we were satisfied with our collection, my dad and I went inside to wash the plums, handling them with care so as not to cause any damage. Being an enthusiastic eater, my dad always devoured the majority of our compilation, and during Oklahoma's humid summer months, he always had a plum in hand. The only person who came close to enjoying the "Hilborne plums" as much as my dad did was Ida. Ida was my nanny from the time I was brought home from the hospital in a Christmas stocking (my birthday being so close to Christmas), and her dedication to our family has practically made her our kin. Ida loved those plums. Dad always gave her a share of our supply and she graciously savored each one. During the day I often caught sight of her nibbling on one of those plums, and occasionally I would look out my window to see her inspecting the few plums that remained on our bare tree.

The plum-picking tradition ended when I was eleven years old and my dad moved out when my parents were separated. Summers came and passed, and no plums were gathered, for I had no interest in trying to carry on the tradition without my dad. I remember asking him, not long after the divorce, if he would come over to see my new room. He declined, saying it was too upsetting for him to return to the house in which we had been a family for so many years. This past summer, six years after my parents' divorce, my dad agreed to accompany me to feed my dogs at my mom's house while she was out of town. Not ten minutes after he entered my mom's backyard, a place in which he had not set foot for years, I found him back at the plum tree. Again he was gazing at the highest branch, viewing its plums and silently judging each one. He picked as many plums as he could carry in his small, plump hands and walked inside the house to give Ida a portion of his findings. Our tradition had survived..

It is hard to believe that one of the most meaningful memories I have of my childhood with my dad was the result of his love for a fruit I never bothered trying until now. It is amazing how something as simple as a plum can create such a strong feeling of nostalgia, one that my dad and I will remember and cherish forever.