

## The White Peach

*for Louise with gratitude and affection*

By Richard Elman

The pleasures I've taken from writing and publishing many novels and poems are great and enduring, but they have none of the astonished intensity I experienced when I tasted the first small white peach the size of an apricot grown in my own backyard in early September.

Love at the lips was taste as sweet as I could bear, writes Robert Frost. The pleasure I experienced with that dollop of dulcet perfumed softness dissolving in my mouth reminded me of the first open-mouthed kiss snatched with pretty Marlene Gimprich on the platform of the Beverly Road BMT station in Brooklyn when we were both out on our first date at age 12. I felt suddenly shy and wonderstruck, this gluttonous internal license urging me to taste again, and more, again....

Because I live on a very shady bluff above the Sound growing most things like vegetables is pretty nearly impossible, and there are only occasional microplaces beyond the hedges where one can even plant flowering shrubs and blooms. The harbor views are the proverbial oil painting from all our many windows; the vegetation closer at hand is green all year around, thick and febrile-looking, though dullish, a small forest of white oaks and maples with some areas cleared away for grass.

On our property I've always wanted to grow something I could eat, aside from the pots of basil that thrive in sunny areas along our deck, and when a friend who microgardened organically with great success, offered me a white peach sapling with a dark red stem the size of a number 2 pencil in a small clay pot and promised I would have peaches someday if I cared for my little offshoot, I felt as I did when my wife told me what her obstetrician said was going to be her due date about 12 years ago; with awe, with trepidation and gratitude I accepted her offer.

My friend helped me select an area in the narrow back garden facing the Sound that was sheltered by a hedgerow of giant yews from winter blasts and yet vulnerable to the afternoon sun from one o'clock to twilight; and then, one warm sunny morning, two years ago, I dug out a hole big enough for a convention of moles and mixed potting soil with dessicated cow manure and

potshards and installed my sapling and piled the soil back up around the sides like a temple at Palenque or Chichen Itza, so that all that would jut above ground was a stem and a few red leaves about the height of a Virginia Slims cigarette standing on end.

My future peach tree looked so puny that I despaired immediately that anything would come of such an effort, and I went back two or three times that first day to inundate the surrounding area with a mix of spring water and cow manure articles, and the next day, and the next. Suppose it would not take root? It did not seem to be growing any taller, at first, but after an absence of a week out of town, when I instructed a neighbor's son to water my peach tree, I returned to find a long skinny twig springing from that mound three or four times its previous height.

Ancient aboriginal gardeners used to practice sympathetic magic; they'd kill a king and scatter his parts about the garden to make the corn, or sorghum, grow taller. As that first summer grew fulsome and waned, I practiced a magic mumbo jumbo of my own confection. I sang and danced about the sapling, watered it and weeded and inundated the surrounding area and propped the struggling plant up with an old bamboo fishing pole. It responded to my ministrations by continuing to grow apace, a long thin leafless wand that wobbled in the winds of early fall while I mulched all about it with corn husks and kitchen scraps, mussel shells, a small piece of stale brie left over from a book party, I wanted my rooting peach tree to have a balanced diet of organic mulch and other nitrogen-rich delicacies.

That first winter my peach tree seemed incredibly bare and dormant in its little dell of cold sunlight, and I feared it would not winter over. But when the pussy willows began to bud in February I went out back and noticed the sun on a few bare branches at least a foot above the level where they'd be when Fall had begun.

The new Spring was a time of chanting encouragement, again as I fertilized more and the tree sprang up higher and higher until it was waist high above the fecal odors of cows beside my 6 foot 4 inch body, and now branches were exfoliating everywhere and each was abandoned to an exuberance of maroon and green leaves, as elegant as shot silk or samite.

There were no blossoms that first spring but so much leaf in effulgence that friends, including my gardener friend, remarked on the rich salading of the branches and the tree's obvious good health.

That summer I pruned a few back and watered and inundated and fertilized again, and daily in some instances, dancing and singing all the while Mohawk Indian chants and Hebrew psalms and trite old Joyce Kilmer riffed to a tune of Theolonius Monk, and then watched in amazement as the tree umbrellaed to an adolescent sashaying swagger, full hipped and beautiful like young girls in summer dresses waiting at a bus stop.

Autumn fears beset me again and I mulched heavily with every conceivable kitchie rind and husk and gourmet treat and hoped the winter would be mild.

A great ice storm hit our bluff in January. The bare branches and trunk of the peach was glazed over for a couple of days and looked rather like one of those glass botanical models in Harvard's Peabody Museum.

Even after the snow and ice melted spring was late in coming. Then I looked out one mildly sunny afternoon in early April from my deck and noticed a shocking pink furze of blossoms along some of the branches, a scattering of blooms like a froth that augured possibilities beyond my more morbid imaginings.

These pink blooms were fragile and lasted only a few days, and I fertilized again and dared not hope for more, as the tree went into leaf again, but in early June when I went out with a machete to cut back some of the undergrowth there were tiny brown nubbins the size of an infant's naval along the branches wherever certain blossoms had occurred.

I called my friend to inquire about infestations, and she reassured me, "You're going to be a father again. You're going to have peaches if you can keep the squirrels away."

How was I to go about doing that? I asked. She suggested sprays of a non-poisonous organic kelp solution on the undersides of the tree, and in August I was to purchase a net which, she assured me, would also deter the many marauding birds.

We had a lot of rain last summer and not a great deal of sun, but by mid-August when I spread out my net my peaches were the size of apricots, hard and only slightly rosy, still more wish than fruit.

“They’ll start dropping off in early September,” she assured me, “and then you can have a ball and harvest them.”

I waited. The peaches didn’t seem to be growing that much more. They all looked stubborn and hard. On a particularly hot and muggy day I dripped water from a hose for twenty four hours into the tree’s roots, and mulched again with fresh corn husks, and when I came out the next morning there was subtle bouquet of peach in the air near my deck, and, upon investigating, I saw some were fallen into the net, and nearly all the others were soft and ruddy, pregnant with the summer’s sweet liquors.

I harvested about twenty peaches and ate a quarter of them that first morning, savoring the special ambrosia that’s distilled in mind and body from growing things by our required efforts. I hope by next summer to be baking pies, or distilling eau de vie.

I have so much hope from my tree. Though less strenuous and macho than surfing off Stinson Beach in California, gardening is an activity, like making love that requires touch, care, concern, a gentle eye for observation, and much hope. Triumphant, as I did, in this small way, restored some of my sense of personal worth, significantly depleted by my summer working on a new novel.

I wish I could say I came back to writing replenished entirely by my peach-growing experience, but the two activities are so disparate they don’t necessarily complement each other. I know now that if you plant a sapling sufficient care will eventually produce a good sweet taste in the mouth. Writing novels, on the other hand, usually produces the firm resolve, at best, to write the whole book all over again and better. I’ve never really been a writer, I’m a rewriter, and that’s my greatest literary talent, whereas I can now truthfully boast without equivocation I grow heavenly white peaches.

*Postscript: This essay was written approximately between 1992-3. The novel Richard was working on that summer was **Love Handles**. The finished manuscript is posted on this website.*

