
*WHY DO I WRITE: My ghost... my phantom...
my fantôme...*

Anthony Paul Griffin

This morning (October 21, 2015), I decided to make some buttermilk biscuits prior to beginning work. The previous Friday I had stopped at Phoenicia Speciality Foods in west Houston and purchased a couple of jars of Noyan's preserves - one blackberry, one peach. Noyan is an Armenian producer of preserves, jams and juices. Most of their preserves are produced without preservatives, or artificial colors and flavorings; fruit combined with sugar to create a wonderfully pleasing product. My discovery of Noyan's products is in part the byproduct of my contemplating making James Beards' sour cream coffee cake for the first time (1976). When studying the recipe I noticed Beard recommended using an apricot preserve - without pectin. At the time I had no understanding of pectin's purpose. I also had no concept of the difficulty I would encounter seeking to find a commercial preserve which met the recipe's requirement. This was not my first time playing Marco Polo in search for ingredients. Once when studying one of Beard's recipes for 'ham balls, sweet and sour', I noticed the recipe called for Chinese mixed pickles - thus began my search - Marco Polo, Marco Polo.

Three years later, I stood in a downtown store, which seemed to be for the thousandth time, communicating by signs, symbols - telling the owner what I intended to cook. For some reason our primitive communication exchange worked.

"Wait here!"

The store owner hustled over to the can goods' section, bent downward out of my sight line, and began pushing and sliding cans before reappearing –upward - holding his find skyward, as if a sacrificial offering was being made.

Wikipedia defines Chinese pickles in the following manner, “Chinese pickles or Chinese preserved vegetables consists of various vegetables or fruits, which have been fermented by pickling with salt and brine (鹹菜) or marinated in mixtures based on soy sauce or savory bean pastes (醬菜).” Wikipedia did not exist when I began my search, nor during my search; the Internet probably was a conceptual joke. John Lennon was still alive, although he had long released his song, Imagine. I must admit Beard recommended visiting a Chinese grocer – “available at Chinese food stores”. Beard ignored that Houston, then, was not as diverse as the West Coast. When I visited a couple of Chinese grocers, I first had to get over their initial shock of a young black male (*I think we were black then*) visiting looking for products in their stores. After entering the stores, I then had to learn how to bridge the cultural gap (one such grocer could not speak English until I assured him I intended to purchase the veal and ham and would also pay him to grind both. His English was better than mine after I paid for five pounds of veal and five pounds of ham, then for the grinding of both. However, money or no money, he couldn't help with Chinese pickles, instead instructing me to try the stores downtown – which I did years later). It was then I was able to watch the store owner thrust the can skyward, proclaiming, “Chinese mixed vegetables. This it! This it!” He celebrated externally; I celebrated internally, having finally located something I was beginning to believe didn't exist. When he placed the can on the counter I noticed an English inscription (“Chinese mixed vegetables”) was below the hànzì inscription (中国拌蔬菜).

The Houston metropolitan area's population then was not as diverse as it is now – no matter how many cook books one procured - constricted fares, traditional and limited offerings was the option available for the most of us. Niko Niko's (a Greek Restaurant) was at that time housed in what appeared to be a roadside stand. We were a population which believed authentic pita was that which was served by Jack-in-the Box. For that matter kimchi rolls might as well have been the meal of ghouls and goblins.

Back to my breakfast – my buttermilk biscuits are actually my grandmother's biscuits; biscuits she made during my youth. Over the years I have done my best to replicate her feat - sometimes close, most times not. No, mines are not horrible, they simply don't meet the otherworldly standards which lie in the recesses of my taste buds, memories and dreams – all enhanced by the morning sun, the sound of chickens scurrying and livestock rustling in the distance. Confessions being what they are - my years of futility and imperfection have caused me to develop and un-described envy of Samantha Stephens of Bewitched fame.

Before proceeding, let me help the uninformed. Bewitched was an American television program which ran from 1964 to 1972. Samantha Stephens (played by Elizabeth Montgomery) was a witch who was married to an advertising executive, Darrin Stephens (originally played by Dick York and later Dick Sargent). Darrin was a mere mortal. Samantha was a *kind* witch who kept her supernatural powers a secret. When she did exercise her powers she did so for the good. Samantha possessed all of Superman's powers, could spin a web like Spiderman; she invoked her magical powers by a twitch of her nose. When I watched Samantha how I wished I could twitch and summon grandmother's spirit, and make a child's request for a batch of biscuits and fresh preserves. How I wished. So I wished.

This morning while working and silently wishing I was visited by an ethereal-being. I learned quickly this demonic soul had little to no knowledge of the art of bread making, but seemingly unlimited and imminent knowledge, down to the trivial minutiae, of matters only a grandmother would possess. The apparition ... the ghost ... appeared to be the same dress size as my grandmother. Her white hair frazzled in the same manner, as if she had been toiling the entire day in the same farm house which never had air conditioning, or fans. They, my grandparents, relied upon nature's grace, opening the windows, allowing the cross breezes to sooth and comfort. A slight beam of sweat claimed her hair line. She wore the same brown support hose she wore daily, changing to white on Sunday - October 21st was not a Sunday - she wore brown support hose. The hands, nose and ears all appeared to be the same. She walked the same, those durable dusty work shoes were overlaid with both sand and corn meal. *It's her, it's her!*

I mentioned buttermilk as an ingredient, she ignored me. When I spoke fondly of my remembrances of clabbered milk she responded with a terse and telling, "yeah, yeah." I attempted to ignore her response by saying I never understood what clabbered milk was until I was an adult.

"Did you know clabbered milk is unpasteurized milk that has been allowed to naturally sour – thus the bitter and sour taste."

She waited for me to finish before adding another "yeah" to her last response, as if to make it clear she could care less. "Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

She then asked me to repeat my name, in a low voice, not necessarily evil, but surely not at all kind. I had a feeling she knew my name but was using the question to put me in my place. She didn't stop there, "And you are whose child?" When I stepped back with my mouth agape,

she moved toward me (not in a step by step, inch by inch way), first reaching over me then changing course (in an “oh heck” kind-of-way), and reaching through me – retrieving a previously non-existent can of Pillsbury biscuits from the refrigerator. She never twitched her nose. I didn’t feel a thing, she went clean through me. Her magical powers were overlaid with a bitter frown, a nonchalant stance, and a bothersome aura, as if her presence here was a source of her disturbance from more important surreal matters.

“This is as good as it gets,” she proclaimed.

“As good as it gets; a can of store bought biscuits?” – I asked.

I was now more confused than ever – a confusion which didn’t last long; seeming she also possessed the ability to read my mind, and thoughts. “You do know you have been dreaming and fictionalizing the difference in my biscuits and yours? Don’t you?”

“Who are you?!”

She didn’t answer instead she again walked through me to retrieve a pan. At this time I noticed she had two pupils in her left eye and a deer’s horn in her right. They - her eyes - were the color of cow’s liver.

“I have met your request, now let’s talk about you.”

“Wait, wait, Samantha Stephen was nice.”

“Wait, wait, nothing. I knew Samantha Stephens, she wasn’t that nice. You do know she wasn’t a real witch don’t you.”

“No, no, no”, was my limited response, all said while taking my chair. My “no’s” seemed so reflective, not directed to the ghostly figure which had invaded the kitchen, but my own confusion. *Samantha was not a real witch. My grandmother’s spirit shows up peddling biscuits out of a can. I don’t remember Chester Anna having two pupils in one eye and the*

image of a deer's horn in the other pupil – her eyes were brown, weren't they? Maybe I didn't notice; I was a child after-all. Her skin color was the same was the same as Chester Anna's, albeit seemingly more translucent. Also I have never seen my grandmother in a hood, maybe I missed that too – maybe she wore the hood today, and dressed in an all-black ensemble, because of the recent rains.

I sat waiting for her to say something, anything. Instead, she opened the can of biscuits, placed the biscuits in the pan in the same motion one would pour a cake batter, they laid in the pans as if placed carefully by the best baker. She placed the pan in the over by reaching through the oven door, placing the pan on the middle shelf. The never opening the door, was a trick now grown stale – seen that; the not touching the temperature knob – hadn't seen that; she had me, bringing me back to an unabashed level of *oh gosh*. She did all this without twitching, with body language conveying that her display was a matter of fact than a display of the impossible. Still, the most telling physical feature remained the grimace, as if conveying the bothersome nature of my company. She then took a seat next to me, looking at me, through me, waiting for me to discuss all of my previous life transgressions. This last feat was not magical at all - this is what she did as a mortal – not talking to you, but somehow she knew the question, while waiting for her grandchildren to admit your transgressions.

“What kind of ghost are you, the ghost of sins past?”

She said nothing, continued staring, waiting. She then vanished in the same matter she appeared – without notice, fanfare or warning - gone.

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In that I don't own any dairy cows and unpasteurized milk is not readily available in the markets I visit, I substitute buttermilk and add butter as my binding agent to approximate the

richness of the farm products which lied within my grandparent's reach. I have long ago fled to specialty flours to approximate the crusts which encrusted the bottom of her biscuits. Our attack, as children, on the biscuits placed before us was always interrupted by her command for us to "stop and pray first."

The biscuits and cornbread of my youth served as appropriate instruments for slopping juices lying in the plate – as if they (the juices) were attempting to hid or escape. Those breads represented appropriate reservoirs for the fresh butters our young arms shook (in small batches) or churned (when a larger batch was needed). The preserves were crafted from the fruits which bore from the trees lying in the gardens which seemed to be within an arm's reach around the house; fresh fruits immersed with sugar and then enhanced by heat. When whole peaches were canned, stems of fresh cloves were used as the enhancer. The pear preserves – the pears remained firm, not too soft, or too sweet, as if the pears blossomed and matured in the canning process. A heritage similar to Beard's recommendation, preparation without preservatives, artificial colorings or flavorings.

So I prepared. So I anticipated.

While moving from the newspaper, back to the kitchen, then to the television, I reminded myself to smell, and not look, as the final processes played out - the melding of the ingredients by heat; somewhat akin to the lessons of life, much like how history plays out - over, over and over again.

When waiting I convinced myself to open the newly purchased Noyan peach preserves. I applied pressure to the top – and twisted to the right – then to the left – with no success. I moved to another room with the jar – applied pressure – trying to remember which direction was open. I then added a verbal overlay – the pressure and words were without worth. I then moved back

to the kitchen, grabbed a dish cloth and wrapped the top, placed the jar between my legs, and instead complimenting the task with words, I inserted a most manly grunt – the top didn't budge. I applied water. I decided against applying heat. I tapped the top against the table – then realized I was tapping glass against glass. I moved to another room and went to tap the jar against a wooden table, then stopped - *I just waxed that table*. While moving from room to room, I saw images of my mother handing me jars to open for her when I was a teen. At some point in time during the squeezing, grabbing, grunting, I ignored the voice seemingly must too close, as if glued to my head, inside my head. "I'll open it if you want. You saw what I did with the refrigerator and the stove." I ignored her - electing instead to eat the blackberry preserves. To be honest, if the blackberries engage in the same exercise of futility, I would have changed my choice to a previously opened jar of honey. If the honey provided the same resistance, requiring me to apply the same resistance ... butter would have done me just fine. She, ... *the ghost ..., phantom..., specter..., spirit..., wraith..., roho..., the, the, the ... shebah...*, moved sublimely around me, about me and through me. She placed her nose against my face in a grandmotherly way, then into my face, in a way I should now have been accustomed – but I wasn't – whispering – "I'll do it for you, the same as you use to do for Georgia. I will. I will." Her words were accompanied by an eerie chuckle which pieced by my chest wall, ran up through my sternum and out my mouth. The "no, thank you" was really her "no, thank you" in that the words were now in her voice tone, now accompanied with an eerie chuckle. I dared not ask - *how did you do that?*

She crossed her legs, not like Samantha Stephens. Her right leg went over and through her left. This demonic soul ran her hand through my grandmother's hair, continuing her most pathetic observations - "You can't open it!"

“Well I decided I didn’t want peaches, blackberry goes better with your canned biscuits - If that is what is coming out of the oven!”

“At least you’re catching on. I put canned biscuits in the oven and canned biscuits will come out, unless, you too, are possessive of some unknown magical powers.” With her words she stood, stretched her body then emitted an eerie crackle, one which rolled with the Gulf wind, and travelled farer and longer than the Nile. “Time waits for no man! Are you going to treat the damn jar as you have treated your biscuit recipe – never satisfied, forever attempting to perfect. Cooking is much like life, never perfect, never ideal; you do the best you can. You can’t open the jar, live with it. Your mother did. I did, well not I – the source of my spirit did. At the rate you’re going the use by date on that jar of preserves will become a historical relic. ‘So do you want me to open the jar?’” I was now sat in total silenced. This did not stop the ghost... phantom... specter... spirit... wraith ...apparition.

My ghost ...my multo ... my bóng ma ... retook her seat, lightly, as if floating, while continuing her rant. “Time waits for no man. What do you want – perfection. Most things are like having children - never a perfect time! The perfect partner – please my child, you’re not perfect and what possesses you to belief that anyone else is also!” “Eeeeeee-eeeeeeee – perfect time to travel?” ... “Eeeeeee-eeeeeeee - perfect time to write.” ... “Eeeeeee-eeeeeeee – there is no perfect time, you can say it is your fate, or assign the reason to your faith, or you can recognize that most times its’ unexplainable...there is no perfect time.” With her last words, the same eerie crackle came forth – now more sustained, just as piercing, as if hollering, summoning - calling. Sea birds began alighting on the balcony. First ten, then twenty, ...thirty, ...fifty ... a hundred; the wind lashed against the bay windows, violently whipping the palm, all while the sea

birds remained put, as if waiting for an imperceptible signal. I stood, turned and reached in the refrigerator for the peach preserves. I placed the preserves on the table and slide the jar across the table without saying a word. *My ghost, my phantom, my fantôme ...* kindly opened the jar. The storm then magically abated, disappeared, as if it never appeared. The sea birds took flight. I then reached in the oven pulling out, not the canned biscuits, but the best version of Chester Anna's biscuits I have ever had – never to complain again.
