

Jelly Time

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When I was a girl, every June

Grandma would say, “It’s jelly time.”

Load up.

Everyone.

Aunts and cousins and Mama and sisters.

Time to go

to harvest the berries.

We’d bring every bowl, every container.

Fill them all to the brim.

(And fill your tummy, too.)

Grandma always joked they should weigh us as well when we go to pay.)

Pick pecks of the perfect Michigan berries...

Long hours,

hot in the sun,

refreshed by

the sweetness—

red, sweet strawberry juice

trickling down your throat,

dripping off your fingers, staining your lips—

of the perfect kind of day with the ones you love most,

loving

as you work in tandem:

a way that only happens at jelly time.

Then back to Grandma's, where bachelor uncles

drift through the kitchen for a peek

and get roped into helping—

crush

hundreds of pounds of perfect berries,

because little arms get tired eventually,

but jelly won't make itself.

We sterilize jars.

Grandma explains each step,

carefully,

cautiously,

with love.

Again, long hours—

but they are a joy.

The aunts and cousins eventually go home.

But not Mama and Grandma and sisters and me.

We keep making.

We keep tasting.

We keep saving up the flavors of a Michigan summer

to savor all year.

When bedtime comes,

Grandma's freezer holds a year

of bagged-lunch sandwich jelly.

Jars for all of us to get us through (no need to skimp)—

all us grandkids have “Grandma Jelly” sandwiches

in our lunch pails

every.

day.

We are the envy of the lunchroom.

Even our classmates can taste the kind of day we had.

They would swap me their Oreos and fruit snacks.

But I'm not interested.

Now I'm the Mama.

Still we know times like these—“jelly times.”

Days when we all go—

parents and kids and friends and neighbors—

and savor the bounty of the season

from our own little garden

(how many zucchini plants does any Michigander need?),

or U-pick farms,

or farmers' markets,

and bask in the sweetness
of food and togetherness.

Even in tough times,
we reap a harvest,
and it's always a blessing to share.