

The Hostage

by Ann Bogle

I sat alone at the table behind a plate of frozen peas. My mother had taken her coffee and *Tribune* to the living room. My father was downstairs cleaning the stems of his pipes. When he was done, he would come back upstairs with an armload of pine logs and old newspapers. My sister was watching *Apple's Way* in the den. She had finished all her dinner, and she didn't have homework.

I stared so hard at the peas that they turned into frog eyes. They could have been in my stomach, wasted, spinning with water and pork debris. I wanted to touch one with my tongue. I wanted to put them on the clean floor and step on them.

The dishwasher stopped between cycles, and the silence woke my cat, Hagatha, who was asleep on top of it. My mother came in the kitchen to check the dishes and to see how I was doing with my peas and milk. The peas were so horrifying that I had forgotten about the milk. She rubbed Hagatha's chin. Then she turned on me.

"Finish them up, so I can put your dishes in."

"No," I said, almost inaudibly, and squirmed in my chair. I was completely demoralized and too old to be a hostage to peas.

"Eat them now or go to bed."

I could always tell my mother was breaking when she gave me a choice.

"Okay," I said. "I'll eat the peas." Then I gauged them, as if I were a diver standing on a cliff above a treacherous coast. My hope was that my mother would get tired of waiting and return to her comfortable chair in the living room. Then I could, very quietly, slip the peas under the placemat and mush them down. She wouldn't find them because I would get up at daybreak and wipe off the table.

She was leaning against the sink with her arms folded, her eyes on me. My mother should have been a minister or a peace officer. Instead, she was a homemaker who ran the home like an

agency. There were certain hard and fast rules. She would wake us from sleep or call us in from outdoors if she found a smudge on the bathroom mirror or a gum wrapper next to the wastebasket.

We heard a fluttering of wings and the rattle of boards at the kitchen window. A female blue jay had landed at the feeder, and my mother turned to rap on the pane: "Out of here, you thing! Out of that food!"

Just then, I scooped up three peas and dropped them in my milk. When my mother turned around again, I was chewing. She watched me put the last pea in my mouth and swallow it. I nearly gagged. It was unnatural to swallow a thing without chewing it first. It was unnatural to eat vegetables at all.

"When I leave here," I said, still gulping, my eye on her, "I'll buy peas and grind them in the disposal."

"You have a few years to go before then, young lady."

It was customary in my family, when I was difficult, to show me the door. My father, especially, relished the dramatic task of opening the backdoor wide and telling me that if I didn't like it here, I could try it out there. At other times, they forgot I was Pam. I became "young lady." My freedom was so far distant, I would be an old lady before it came.

"Drink your milk."

"Drink it?"

"Drink it."

At that moment, I wished my parents were like the Bloomfields. The Bloomfields got to eat dinner and watch TV at the same time. There was never any problem with vegetables, because they never had any. They ate hamburgers and french fries. If the kids were bad, Mrs. Bloomfield chased them around the house with a wooden spoon. Sometimes she got them, and sometimes she didn't, but they never had to do anything as horrible as drink warm milk with peas in it.

"Mom," I said, making my voice sound as adult and reasonable as possible, "my milk is warm."

"You should think of that earlier."

I heard footsteps on the stairs. My sister had gone down to round up my father. Soon they would make a fire, and no one would help me with math.

"Okay," I said. "I'll drink my milk, rinse my dishes, and you check my worksheet."

"Your father is coming up."

I clutched the bottom of my chair with one hand and the bottom of my glass with the other. I began to sip with the steadiness and determination of a hurdler. I glared at my mother over the rim of my glass.

"Bella," my father called, "help me with this grate."

I smiled inside my glass. My mother went to the living room to get the fire going. I went to the sink and poked the peas down the drain.

Later, while we sat by the fire, my father squeezed my mother's hand, and she smiled at him. Then he told us that his mother had been like our mother, and though we didn't understand it yet, we would thank her one day for the trouble she took.

