

## The Art of Shelling Peanuts

*Crack, snap.* My hands throbbed as I cracked open what must have been the five-hundred and sixtieth peanut of the day. I tapped the shell a couple of times against my palm and watched as a small, reddish-brown nut toppled out, free at last from its protective cocoon.

Pinching the newborn peanut between two fingers, I held it up to my face for a closer inspection. This nut, like the five-hundred and fifty-nine before it, had been grown by my host family during last year’s rainy season. All of the peanuts would eventually be ground into a fine, protein-rich powder that could be added to porridge or sprinkled over potatoes, so it didn’t really matter that this particular nut was shaped more like a knobby elbow than anything resembling the plump, perfect Planter’s peanuts that I was accustomed to. I shrugged and tossed the nut into the wicker basket in front of me, watching it wobble for a second before eventually settling in to its new – albeit temporary – home.

#

It was hot this time of year in Malawi. Rain hadn’t fallen in this part of Africa for six months or so, and clouds large enough to create shade were a rarity. I was seated on the hard ground of the courtyard, legs folded beneath my body mermaid-style, and sweating in the still afternoon heat. I and six other university students from around the United States were in Malawi as part of a three-month, three-country program studying global agriculture and food systems, and we had been informed by our program director that the pace of living here would be different – slower – than what we were used to. So far, I was finding that to be true.

#

Malawians, I had discovered, rise and set with the sun. Their days begin as soon as the sun peeks its head above the horizon and end when the last of the slanted, orange rays fade from view.

During the rainy season, which generally lasts from November to April, there is much work to be done: tilling the soil, preparing the rows, seeding the crops, applying fertilizer, combatting weeds, and eventually, harvesting. The land comes alive – not only with greenery and vegetation – but with the daily hustle-bustle of Malawian families hard at work in the fields.

But this was the dry season. The landscape that I had encountered upon arriving a few days ago looked nothing like the green, agricultural paradise that I had heard so much about. The fields lay barren, devoid of life except for the occasional mango tree, and families occupied themselves elsewhere. Some of the village children attended school – a single-story brick building with open windows through which uniform-clad boys and girls would stare as I passed by, some pointing, and others shouting *Azungu!* The Chichewa word for ‘foreigner.’ Other children occupied themselves playing soccer in the sloped, grassless field adjacent to my homestay family’s house, and the women – many carrying sleeping infants on their backs – pattered around their houses, sweeping the courtyards, or preparing a meal over a charcoal stove.

#

Today, my host mother had decided that it was a peanut-shelling day. Having finished classes for the day, I had returned to the house to find her sitting on the steps of the courtyard, a wicker basket of peanuts in front of her. On the walk back, I had mentally rehearsed the short string of Chichewa words that we had learned – a rather unimpressive question: *How was your day?* – and an even more unremarkable response: *My day was good.* Yet the moment I had set foot in the

house and was met by my host mother’s silent brown eyes, the words had betrayed me, leaving me abandoned and vulnerable. Utterly wordless. Fortunately, my two-year old host sister had begun crying from the other end of the house, so the uncomfortable, muted exchange was quickly terminated as my host mother brushed peanut crumbs off her lap, pushed herself to her feet, and hurried in the direction of the crying child.

I had expected her to return shortly, but when she didn’t, I decided to seat myself and pick up where she had left off. It had taken me a while to get into a rhythm, but I had eventually discovered a method that worked. With one hand pressed firmly over the other, I would roll a peanut (a bit like rolling dough) back and forth over the solid ground until the shell finally gave way with a satisfying *crack*. I’d then tap the reddish nut into my palm, give it a quick inspection, toss it into the basket if I deemed it worthy, and start again. For the first three-hundred peanuts or so, I had enjoyed myself. I’d never shelled peanuts before, and was finding it quite fun. But now, five-hundred and sixty peanuts in, my palms ached, and I looked in dismay at the nearly unchanged pile of unshelled peanuts. I wondered if my host mother would even be able to tell that I had been working in her stead.

It wasn’t until a minute later that I looked up and – with a start – saw her standing in the doorway, observing me with an expression that I couldn’t quite read. I didn’t know just how long she had been there. Her lips were pressed into a thin line – not a frown, but not quite a smile, either – and her eyes bored into me with what could equally have been curiosity, admiration, or annoyance. Her hair, which she wore longer than most of the other women I’d seen in the village, had been straightened and pulled back into a tight ponytail, and she was resting her slender hands on the fabric of a floor-length skirt – known as a *chitenje* – customary for Malawian women to wear around their legs. Hers today was a shade of deep violet. Hammocked

against her back in a matching piece of fabric was my two-year old host sister, peaceful now and eyes drooping, a single dried, salty tear standing out against her unblemished skin.

Feeling the continued weight and silence of my host mother’s eyes on me, I shifted awkwardly. Again, I racked my brain, trying to coax the runaway Chichewa words back to me. One – the word for either *hello*, *thank you*, or *goodbye* – returned, and I wasted no time in using it.

“Zikomo,” I said to my host mother, smiling.

Her eyes remained fixed on me, unfazed. I swallowed. *Maybe I had misremembered the word? Oh no, what if I accidentally said something profane? Stupid Maia, why didn’t you just keep your mouth shut?*

“Zikomo,” my host mother responded quietly.

I let out a breath that I hadn’t known I was holding. I felt childish in that moment, just a sweaty, messy-haired girl in dusty Velcro sandals, clutching the corpse of a peanut and hoping for the approval of her mother. I looked down, and – not knowing what to do next – grabbed another peanut. In the past hour, I had discovered that not all peanuts are created equal. Some are little angels that crack open as soon as pressure is applied, but others are little shits destined to crush palms, spirits, and souls alike. Turns out, I had grabbed a little shit. I pressed harder, determined to demonstrate to my host mother that I was, in fact, a competent peanut-sheller, but the nut slipped, and my palm slammed into the ground instead. I winced and clutched my reddened hand before recalling that showing pain is a sign of weakness, not peanut-shelling competency.

Before I could comprehend what was happening, I felt soft fingers wrap around my own. My host mother turned my hand so that my palm was facing up, and brushed her thumb gently

over the tender area. She must have concluded that my injuries were minor, because she then retrieved the trouble-making peanut from where it had rolled and placed it in front of me. Hands still holding mine, she positioned my palm over a crease in the hard shell that I hadn't noticed before. She released me, sat back on her heels, and watched expectantly. I knew what I had to do. Bracing myself, I inhaled sharply before pressing down fast and firm, much like how someone might perform a CPR compression.

*Crack.*

I removed my hands, picked up the now-broken shell, and watched as a perfect, reddish-brown nut tumbled into my palm. I dare say that *this* nut might even have been Planter's-worthy. I looked up and was met by a pair of familiar, silent brown eyes. Small wrinkles extended from their corners, and although her lips were still pressed firmly together, I knew that she was smiling at me.

“Takulandilani,” she said softly. *Welcome.*

###