

## Chapter 25

She met us at the door with bowls and utensils. She handed me a bowl and a knife, "Here, Johnny, you peel the peaches and then hand them to her!". She pointed at Angela and gave her a knife and two large aluminum bowls. "Now put the peelings in your bowl, those are good, and we'll need them later. You two can handle that?"

"Yes, mam. "we replied.

"Good. Now, start peeling." She said.

"Now Angela, honey, "she said turning to her granddaughter, "When Johnny hands you a piece, you separated it from the pit and cut it into chunks. Put the hunks in the large bowl. When the large bowl is full, bring it to me in the kitchen and then come back out here on the porch. Keep filling those bowls for me! You got that sweetheart?" The lady talked a mile a minute like she was the happiest she had ever been with her renewed second chance of life.

Angela nodded her head and replied to her grandmother, "Shore do. What are we going to do with all the peach pits then?"

"Oh, we'll take them out to the barn, let them dry. Walter will find a use for them."

She went inside to the kitchen and left Angela and me on the porch. We began out peach processing assembly line. There was a gentle morning breeze blowing through several varieties of wind chimes hanging from the porch. Angela began humming a song which sounded vaguely familiar and then began to sing it as well. When she got to the chorus, I immediately recognized it.

"Bye, Bye Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levy but the levy was dry. Them good old boys were drinking whisky and rye singing this'll be the day that I day. This'll be the day that I die..."

She got up from the porch swing and took her bowl of peaches inside. In seconds, she had returned with an empty bowl. I kept peeling peaches, handing them to her and she kept dicing and removing the pits.

"You know," she started, "That's about the only thing my mom ever given me that I liked."

What thing is that?" I asked.

"My record player. I think when I was about seven, she suddenly showed up from one of her road trips. She was around long enough to take me up to the five and dime to buy a few records, show me how to use it and...and...then she was going again."

"What records do you have?" I asked.

Well, I got that one. I got a song called "Afternoon Delight" and I got one called "Love will Keep Us Together." Then I got some Disney records that I used to listen to, but I don't much listen to anymore like Marry Poppins and The Jungle Book Song. You got any records, David?" she asked me.

"No," I replied. "But my parents have this big stereo in a cabinet with a bunch of records. They hardly ever listen to them though and they won't let me touch it."

Angela got up and took another bowl of diced peaches into her grandmother. She came back out and resumed dicing and talking. "What is an American Pie anyway?" She asked me.

"I dunno," I said shrugging my shoulders. "It kind of reminds me of Apple Pie-isn't that supposed to be America...apple pie and all that stuff?"

"Oh, don't let The Old Man hear you say that, he'd taken it personally." It was the first time I'd heard her actually call him "The Old Man."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Well look in your bucket, Mister. He doesn't like people singing the praises of any other fruit than The Peach. Finest food on the face of the earth, he says. Not too tart, not too sweet, he says. Always cold and juicy when you take a bit, he says."

"Not too tart, not too sweet?" I asked.

"Lordy Mercy. If I've heard him say it once, I've heard him say it a thousand times."

"He sure likes those peaches, "I interjected.

"You have no idea. Those trees out there are like his children!"

"Yeah, I see what you are saying. You know, Angela, until I came here, I don't think I had ever had a Peach before. Well, maybe those that you get in a can at the grocery store. But nothing like this right off the tree."

"Ain't you ever had a peach cobbler, she said?"

"Cobbler?" I asked.

"You don't know what a cobbler is?"

"Nope."

"What's wrong with you boy? You been living under a rock? A cobbler is kind of like a pie. A pie, but the crust and fruit are all kind of lumped together. Seriously...what kind of desserts does your mom make for you?"

"She doesn't, "I replied. "We just keep a cookie jar full of Oreos."

"Just Oreos?" she asked. "No cake. No ice cream. No cobbler?"

"No, none."

"No wonder you are not in a hurry to get back to them."

I didn't reply to that statement, but I thought about it. I knew right from wrong. I knew I should be calling them or trying to contact them, but I was so happy here with the Old Man, his wife and Angela. I didn't want to go back home to the fighting and screaming. The

hiding in my closet until the fights were over. The being shipped off to other people's house. The being shipped off to Church Camp. I felt safe for the first time in a long time. I felt like nothing back could happen to me here.

The fact that she thought I was her long-lost son didn't bother me anymore. I was even starting to let myself believe in the re-incarnation mumbo-jumbo theory that Angela and I had conjured up. I knew what I was wrong, but it felt right. I didn't want to think about it too deeply too often. At that moment, I wanted to push the thoughts from my mind.

Angela interrupted my line of thought, "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Oh no, you didn't," I said. "I was just lost deep in thought and had blocked everything else out for a bit, that's all."

"I get like that too sometimes," she added. "The last time I saw my Mom, she was drilling me with a lot of questions and I really wasn't hearing them and finally she yelled my name over and over until I looked at her and she told me I was acting too spaced out for her tastes."

"Spaced out?" I asked.

"Spaced out," she affirmed to me. And then she said, "Angela, I swear sometimes you just act like a Space Cadet."

"When was that?" I asked. "When did you last see her?"

"Well that was Thanksgiving last year and it's July now, so it's been about eight or nine months. She pops in once, maybe twice a year to check in on me, but that's about it."

"Do you know where she's at right now?" I asked.

She threw up her hands in the air. "No idea at all. I think she just goes wherever she wants to go, with whoever will go with her. I think she still thinks she's going to be a famous singer or actor. She

won talent show at the county fair or something like that when I was just a baby."

I finished the last peach and she diced it into her bowl. We got up from the porch, took our bowls inside to her Grandmother.

"We're all finished, Granny." Said Angela.

Her grandmother was in the kitchen at the stove. There were two giant pots. "Good, Good..." she said. "Now, Johnny. You set those peelings aside there. We'll use those later."

I put them out of the way on the cabinet. She handed both Angela and me a potato masher then put two large bowls of diced peaches on the table. "Now take those mashers and mash them peaches up. When you are done, bring them over to me at the stove."

We started mashing the contents of the bowls. She went back to her stove and began to pour sugar into the large pots. She started stirring them rapidly. When we were finished, we took the bowls over to her. She took each one and poured the contents into the pots and stirred more. She gave us both a large wooden spoon. "Here, "she commanded, "Each of you stir one of these pots until it comes to a rolling boil. And that's not just tiny little bubbles either. A rolling boil looks like those peaches are about to explode out of the pot like a volcano. When you've stirred so much and it looks like it's about to come out, let me know. I'm going over to the sink and start sanitizing these jars."

"How long is it going to take to thicken up that thick" I asked.

"Oh, it's gonna taken thirty or forty minutes, dearie. Your arms are gonna feel like they are about to fall off. You are going to wish you were out there with old Walter picking them peaches and not stirring them in here. Now, get to stirring you two!"

We began to stir the tall cast iron pots that were full of steaming hot peach pulp. We started to sweat. After about fifteen minutes, she moved back over to us from the sink and poured a small package of power into each pot."

"What's that you're pouring?" questioned Angela.

"That's pectin powder, Sweetie." She answered. "That's what will thicken and give it body."

We kept stirring. When my right arm started hurting, I would switch to my left arm and then back to my right arm again. Finally, I got to the point where even switching arms provided no relief. About that time, she looked over our shoulders and said, "Yes, that will about do it." She turned off the stove burners and handed me a funnel like device. "Now, Johnny," she said. "Take this and put it in the first jar. I'm going to fill it with the hot jam. When I've got that one filled, place the funnel in the next jar and I'll fill that one. We'll do this until we run out of jam or jars, whichever happens first. You think you can handle that?"

"Uh huh, "I said taking the funnel and placing it in the jar.

She picked up the first large pot with towels on each side. She began pouring and when she indicated to me, I'd take the funnel and move it to the next jar. When the first pot was empty, she retrieved the second pot of hot jam and began pouring it into the jars. When there was no jam left in the pots, she took two small boxes and handed Angela and me a box each.

"Now, Johnny, you put a lid on each jar like this..." She took one of the lids from my box and put it on top of the jar.

"And you, Angela, sweetie, "she said, "You take a ring and tighten it around each jar lid like this." She took a ring, put it on the lid and twisted it until it was tight.

Angela and I began our tasks of sealing the jam in the pint jars. While we were doing this, she got two more cooking pots from the cabinet and began boiling water in one and cooking sugar in the other pot. When the water was boiling, she grabbed the bowl of peach peelings and put them into the boiling water. She boiled them for fifteen minutes or so, removed the peach peelings from the pot and threw them away. She poured what was left into the pot of sugar.

Again, more stirring of this second concoction. All three of us took turns stirring. She was, at times humming and at other times singing to herself. Could have been some old church gospel tunes.

When the brew was thickened, we went through the whole process of pouring and sealing the mixture into pint jars. She pointed to the first set of jars and said, "Now, there's peach preserves and there's peach jelly." Peach Jelly was the second set of jars.

"We'll let them set and seal overnight then put them up in the pantry tomorrow morning. She shuffled over to a chair and fell into it, "Heaven's to Betsy!" she exclaimed. "What a day, you two come over here and sit down with me. Take a load off your little feet."

We all sat down, and she gave us both a warm smile. I had only known this woman for one day and I felt like I had known her all my life. I could hardly believe that this was the first time she had sat down in her house all day.

She began to gently rock in the chair. "Good to be back. Good to be back among family..." Her voice trailed off and her head tipped back as she nodded off for a nap. I looked at the clock, it was 7:00 pm in the evening. Angela walked out on the porch and I followed her. Angela sat down on the swing and motioned for me to sit down too.

We moved back and forth in the swing and were silent. It had been such a strange day to have the woman suddenly among us who had conceivably awakened from the dead.

We had been swinging for a few minutes watching the birds and breeze in the tree. Angela's grandmother peeked back out through the screen door and said, "You two didn't think I had slipped back into the deep forever sleep again, did ya?" She asked.

"Oh no, no, Granny!" answered Angela. "We know you were just having a little nap in there."

"You two were good helpers today," she said. And then she stepped out on the porch. She had a large bluish quart jar in her hands. It was full of crinkled up dollar bills. She took a seat on the

porch rocking chair. "Can't believe Walter never found this. I had hidden it above the stove behind the fine China." She took off the lid, put her hand in and pulled out a couple of bills. She handed us both a ten-dollar bill and said, "Thank you so much for helping an old lady happy today." She walked in and we followed.

About that time, The Old Man walked in. "Didn't make it to The Market today," he said. "I'll put the peaches in the cooler and taken them first thing in the morning. Did get a chance to go into town today and hire a couple of young men to help with the rest of the harvest though. They're supposed to show up day after next. Remains to be seen if they're actually good to their word though."

He brushed off his feet, put his hat on the wall and started to walk in.

"Walter!" said Clarisse.

He stopped suddenly in his tracks and gave her a frightened questioning look.

"Boots off. Or you'll track a pound of that red dirt all over my floor."

He shrugged his shoulders, took off his boots and walked towards his wife. He gave her a short kiss on the cheek and said, "It's almost too good to be true Dear...too good to be true."

She embraced her husband then put him back at arm's length, smiled, then nodded. And out of nowhere, she said, "Walter, where the T.V.?"

"Mmmmm," said The Old Man. "Broke a few years back, never bought a new one. Hardly see a point though. Reception in these woods is always been spotty at best.

"Well then," she started, "When you go to The Market tomorrow, stop at Sears and Roebucks and buy us one. It would be nice to catch up on all my soaps even if the reception is poor."

"Very well, Dear." Said The Old Man.

"Now come out on the porch with me!" she said to her husband. She took his hand, held it and pulled him out the screen door to the porch. "Let's sit down in our swing and watch the stars come out tonight. It's been so long since I've seen the stars."

Angela and I watched them walk out on the porch together. They sat on the swing. Clarisse grasped her husband's right arm and moved closer to him. There were cicadas buzzing in the trees and a constant breeze going in and out of the wind chimes.

We stayed inside and played dominoes for a while. Angela then gave me another clarinet recital. We went to bed and I was counting the seals popping on the peach preserve and peach jelly jars still cooling on the kitchen counter. IT was the first night since I had been there that I hadn't sat awake in bed and tried to internally justify my decisions to myself. I just accepted events as they happened and fell asleep.