

## **The Jelly Women** (*published CALYX 29:2*) first five pages included

*by Margaret Osburn*

Momma says everyone has ear worms—voices that won't stay quiet in our heads. So, just as she pushed me onto that Greyhound bus, she made sure to call out, in that happy way of hers, that I was headed for the ends of the earth. But if truth could be found, I'd find it there. Fanciful. Like skunk cabbage.

And then, there I was in Pavo, Georgia, sitting in my grandma's jelly store. Right off, I asked Grandma Bish the hardest question and she answered back, not saying, but saying she hadn't seen my daddy since before I was born. And, since I hadn't seen him myself for almost as long, I gave up my asking.

I was thirteen. I needed a fresh start.

“What separates marmalade from pure preserves?”

I would learn that soon enough.

In the meantime, Bish formed my fingers 'round a small nail and set me to scratching my initials onto lids of jelly jars, opposite the way I'd see her use a fork to punch *B-I-S-H* into a pie's top crust. Difference being, I was not to push a hole clean through to relieve the juices. Once I had a stack of good ones, Bish said to stop—it might be hard to carry that much jam back to Ohio on the bus.

Bish was a woman of unusual attraction. At fifty, with rounded shoulders and hard little muscles, she was no beauty. She looked as if she refused to cut or comb her salted hair, and she never

wore anything new. But she had sapphire eyes and a smile that was whiter and wider than most who had their natural teeth. And while her fingers were thick and calloused and scratchy when she reached out to catch my scrawny arm, with that one gesture she perfumed an entire room with the tincture of her garden. Old men—and young—adored her, would sit hours in her jelly store to hear her speak. And women liked her too. Mostly, I think, because one way or the other, she held you in her spell.

Before Grandma Bish got her jelly idea and became a successful business woman, “All of Pavo was dead broke,” Uncle Jess told me, with the store regulars jumping in to say, “If not for Bish, Pavo County wouldn’t even be on the map.” But Bish refused credit. All I ever heard her say was, “It started with the jelly women.”

At first there were only a few jelly women, and then they were spread all over the county, a secret society of jelly makers. Each had a specialty—mayhaw, grape, dewberry or peach, apple or pumpkin, hot pepper pecan or green tomato—jams, butters, preserves, conserves, marmalades, or jellies. The jelly women made them all, each sticking to what she knew best.

I met a few of the jelly women that summer, but most I don’t recall. I do remember one man by the name of Mr. Peck. For one thing he had the egg farm down the road, and, for another, he was a friend to my uncle who had an unnamed disability. Mr. Peck was a regular among the jelly women, coming to sit after his egg gatherin’ and deliverin’—and between his huntin’ and shootin’ and his jelly makin’.

Mr. Peck was the only one of my grandma’s jelly makers to give his jelly a trademark name: Pavo Jelly. Like mayhaw, *pavo* was distinctly southern, unique to them who lived there. Pavo was not only the name of the county, it was the Spanish word for turkey. “The Spaniards settled hereabouts in the 1500s,” Bish told me, and they’d left a fort “sunk somewheres in them

sea islands.” True, the English and the French had beat out the Spaniards, but as far as the turkey population, that had never died away. *Pavo* was synonymous with the land.

Mr. Peck’s Official Pavo Jelly™ was made of wild turkey feet. Pavo Jelly made a good cold sandwich spread, but it smelled like dirty socks. And if you believed the claims, you didn’t want to eat too much—not if you were a budding girl. Uncle Jess said, “You can count on it to give you moxie...” with Mr. Peck adding in, “Maybe if you want to grow you an eleven-inch beard, like one of them turkeys...” Did I mention that Mr. “Chicken” Peck heehawed when he laughed?

“How many cherries are enough?”

I’d gotten fast into jelly making.

Bish looked hard at me as cherry juice sluiced over my new calluses and into a substantial wash pan where we pitted a bounty of cherries taken from a small wormy tree. Even as the pits pinged against the pan’s aluminum sides, the out-of-doors ruckus continued. We’d stolen what was ours from a flock of angry jays. We watched through the kitchen screen as they dive-bombed—*who?*—and the air turned the bright blue of stained glass.

She looked hard at me, not bothering to say we had more than enough for our needs.

Grandma Bish got into the jelly selling business after her daddy, Pastor Ernest Bishop, dropped dead, Bish said, from reading too much Old Testament. My own daddy had already left Pavo County, “too young to go,” as if he *too* had died; but all that had really happened was he’d married my momma and moved away.

That was in the ’60s when everybody was putting together their lists of great American dreams. Deep freezers and transistor radios were high up, and Bish had dreams of her own. She

had the stained glass pulled from the church window, and Uncle Jess drove it to Atlanta where he swapped it for a truckload of jelly glasses. Jess and Bish began selling jelly glasses all over Pavo County from the back of their old pickup. Neighbors and friends bought them, and friends of neighbors bought them—glasses, rims, lids, paraffin, labels, and jelly bags that Jess himself sewed from cheesecloth or swatches of flannel. In due time, Bish gave her jelly women a bit of something extra. Her own special additive. It didn't come from fruit or honey. It was dry and rough. She called it *brut*.

In accordance with my grandma's wishes, each woman took an oath. *Brut* would be their secret, not to be shared with anyone outside their circle. And whatever Bish provided was intended to go directly into the women's jelly glasses—not placed directly on an ailing elbow or a tongue. Soon the jelly women were so grateful for how the jelly additive had changed their home lives, that they all but stopped baking pies to be sure they'd have fruit enough to fill their jelly glasses. Finally Bish urged them to stop giving away their wares the way city folks hand out calling cards, and she got them to start a collective—a jelly mart. With no one giving out free jelly, families looked to buy or barter.

That was my grandmother's start as a business woman. Jellies were displayed in a cupboard just inside the central hallway of the old church. Glasses glowed with the deep indigo of plum and the soft blush of grapefruit. The dark butters of apples and pumpkins sat on a table to the side.

For \$1, a passerby could choose a jar from a selection of the South's finest. Naomi Bishop's church store on Bread and Butter Road, Pavo, Georgia, was open to the public. Once that got going, Mr. Peck joined in and Uncle Jess painted purple the church marquee to announce the opening of the *HERE WE HAVE IT*. The jelly business was a big success. Bish made two bits

on each sale and saw transistor radios in everybody's future. What she didn't foresee was the day that jelly making would turn into a much bigger concern than they could have imagined.

One day I was reading, curled up on the fringed chair. It was where Bish had been sitting, some years before, half-nodding over a tome on ancient China—one she'd had sent down from the library in Atlanta—when her rooster started bucking something awful.

“Pontius Pilot raised me clean out of that chair,” said Grandma Bish.

I knew the story of Pontius Pilot, Bish's prize bird, the best watch chicken she'd ever owned. That banty rooster could spy a car two miles up the road. So, on that “sultry Sunday” when Grandma Bish looked out from where the stained glass of Jesus had watched out over His flock, she was expectant, hopeful even, for a load of company. But seeing all the way up Bread and Butter, she saw nothing but the cypress swamp where Spanish moss and resurrection ferns breathed the fecund air.

So, she stilled herself and waited.

Close up, the breeze waved through the garden Jess had set that spring—beans, corn, tomatoes. Bish loved the tangy smell of tomato foliage. Her nose pinched in a whiff as the breeze set to tickling the bee clover and the plot she'd planted thick with mustard, dill, and onions. And then, “*Buck...buck...*” To hear Bish imitate Pontius raised the hackles on my neck. But next, her voice dropped soft and slow to match the rhythms of her story. “A whirl of wind set in, right nice...and blew away the ruckus...”

Most days, right before dusk, a breeze poured through the window screens like a gentle narcotic, easing us into a happy dogsleep. She said she was in that state of happy dogsleep when that next banty alarm caused her to jump straight to the front church door. Outside lay the emerald countryside, the locusts out-singing the sudden hum of a brown police car surprisingly

stopped on the shoulder of her road. Next thing she knew, a “long shadow had flung itself” across her garden. Then, nearer the window, “Something took hold and shook my favorite vine.” As her voice reverberated with emotion, sweat flashed down my neck as I strained to see. I knew just the vine. The night bloomer. It was the pride and curiosity of her garden. She kept it roped waist high to keep its white blossoms from falling face down in the dirt. Night time, moths feasted on their beauty. Daytime, those plate-sized blooms hung limp and heavy, like used supper napkins.

A laugh tangled itself in her breath. “I might better have been with them Baptists in town...” she said, then wobbled her head, just so, as if to shake out any leftover dread before announcing, “Time to shut my yap.” Uncle Jess had arrived with a load of wood for the cook stove. It was the middle of July but you couldn’t let your fruit go to rot. We got busy making jelly.

Grandma Bish had, for now, folded shut her story.

**story continues...**