

The Best Peach Jam in the State

Mia Scattergood

*Runner-up
in the 16 to 19 category of the
Young Walter Scott Prize 2021*

Jenkins County, Georgia, USA, 1902.

After, the first thing I noticed was the flies. There were flies anyway, around our parts - creeping across the peaches on the turn, the ones that rotted on the tree, wrinkled, and stinking up a sweet curdle. But as I rocked on my chair, every day on the veranda – so many flies, too many, that crawled over my eyes and down my throat and behind my brain, clouding up the sky in great swarms, blocking out our blistering Georgia sun. If it were down to the flies the entire country would know where to find Hyde’s Peach Farm.

I don’t rightly know whether that would be good or bad.

Hyde’s Peach Farm - before the flies – home to acres of trees of the sweetest peaches, a bright red farmhouse, and thirteen consecutive wins of the jam competition at the state fair.

The wins were earned by my wife Ada Hyde for her peach jam, and begrudgingly affixed above the mantle by yours truly – the good husband Jackson Hyde.

I can see that mantelpiece now, from my rocking chair, through the cracked windowpane – the wood melts before my eyes, lamp oil drips, shining from each framed certificate. I turn, the flies are gone, replaced by swirls in the sky, large swathes of newspaper ink black.

I can see her in black and white on that newspaper, holding the blue ribboned jar, the Governor’s hand on her waist, her bright red hair and cornflower eyes bleached and burned by the photograph. She grins from ear to ear.

I see her everywhere, just like the flies and the melting and the oil and the ink.

Maybe none of it’s real, and I’m mad as my Ada made me.

She always grinned like that as she made her jam, stirring and stirring like she was a damn spinning top, whistling in time. She hadn’t grinned like that at me since the first certificate went up.

I saw that silvery, sharp grin, on the day of that thirteenth win at the fair, smiling at the governor. His hands on her hips.

A white hot ball of fire in my throat.

Now, I don't consider myself a violent man. But all I could hear was the voice of my old Pa.

"You want to make a woman mind, boy? Make a woman be loyal? You have to be a man about it, understand? Like me."

I didn't quite understand what he meant until I did ... what I did. But I bided my time.

Now, I stand up, move inside. Stare at the vat in the corner, its heavy wooden lid.

It's never changed since that night, even as I struggle and limp to my seat at the head of the table, the room warping and twisting around me. I look to the crucifix on the wall – I am a God-fearing man, even as Satan weaves my world.

I didn't know I was going to do it, until it happened.

We were sat in the low lamplight, two weeks before our fourteenth state fair. Me polishing my axe after a day cutting dead trees, her with her back to me in the corner, stirring and whistling, whistling and stirring.

The governor's hands. Her smile.

"Ada?"

She hummed something that sounded like *yes?*

"Stop that damned noise, will you?"

She did. "Sorry, darlin'."

It wasn't for long though, it started up again, ringing in my ears.

My body moved before my mind could ask what the hell I thought I was doing, till I was stood behind her.

“I said. *Stop.*”

She turned, her hair shifting to expose the nape of her neck, her eyes filled with concern.

The blade of my axe flashed as I brought it down on the base of her skull.

Since then, I don't trust my own senses, what I see, what I hear. Sometimes I think I can hear whistling, even though I did everything right. Laid her to rest where she would have wanted, granted her wishes.

I lean my head back.

All I can hear is the sound of bone breaking in two.

The 23rd Georgia State Fair was a few days ago.

I – we won again.

Everyone loved it – as they extended their thoughts and prayers to my wife, who was too sick to attend – and asked why it tasted so damned good. Housewives clutching pearls badgered me for my secret ingredient – was it the peaches? Was it a spice? Was it the sugar?

“No,” I said, “not any of that.”

I told them the truth.

I told them that it was a little something that had been added to the vat.

I spoke, shrugging nonchalantly – “It's just my wife. A little piece of her in every jar.”