

[ HUMOR/MOSAIC STORY STRUCTURE ]

**“The Jelly Women”** by Margaret Osburn  
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*In the full story / chapter, a “mosaic” narrative structure supports the theme that memory is an amalgam of starts and stops and changes. Thirteen-year-old Emily meets Bish, her entrepreneurial grandmother who has jelly making secrets to share and cautionary tales to tell, but nothing to say on the whereabouts of her son, Emily’s father--the reason for Emily’s visit. ...The Jelly Women, short story and novel, has dark undercurrents.*

*The following excerpts introduce Bish and her jelly store.*

**Before Grandma Bish got her jelly idea** and became a successful business woman, “All of Pavo was dead broke,” Uncle Jess told me, with store regulars jumping in to say, *“If not for Bish, Pavo County wouldn’t even be on the map.”* But Bish refused all credit. All I 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. 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, the 1500s,” Bish told me. As proof, she said, they’d left their fort “sunk somewhere in them sea islands.” The English and the French had beat out the Spanish 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...”

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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 stain 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 to be 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, 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 could have been 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, deep inside, the Spanish moss and resurrection ferns breathed in and out the fecund air.

She stilled herself and waited. 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—and a brown police car parked on the shoulder of the road. Next thing she knew, a “long shadow had flung itself” across her garden. Near the window, “Something took hold and shook my favorite vine.” Her voice reverberated, and sweat flashed down my neck as I strained to see. . .The night bloomer. The pride of her garden, kept roped waist high to stop its plate-sized blooms from falling in the dirt face down. Night time, moths feasted on their beauty. Daytime, those giant white blossoms 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 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.

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Uncle Jess, who was fumble fingered, set his load next to the wood stove as I set up the assembly of glasses. I'd been warned this would be hard, hot work, but I knew from my momma that work was a good thing and

that holding your face over a steamy basin was the way to open your pores and make your skin rosy. At home, in Ohio, we opened our pores and went to bed Saturday nights with our heads soaked in mayonnaise. It didn't bother me to wake up greasy, smelling like egg salad.

Who could have guessed that while we were fixing to sterilize those jelly glasses, Jess would drop one and I'd go to bed that night with scald on my face and arms. With the scald sinking into me, it lit a fire to the stuffed-down feelings I'd brought with me from Ohio. Tears clogged my throat.

Bish acted not to notice. But I knew better. My daddy's momma could look into you, see what was eating at you, and once she knew, she'd pick you out a special jelly and, most times, she'd tell you a story to bring you up. That was the truth of her store's success. So that night, after she'd spooned grape jelly into me, she sat in the attic on the milking stool by my bed, where I was sprawled on top the church quilts she'd gathered—some pieced together more than a hundred years before—and she took me into her confidence.

### **...jumping to pages 9-12**

It was sometime before the next batch of jelly making I asked Bish to walk me where, that dreadful night so long ago, the shadows had crushed her night bloomer. Her blue eyes flashed. "When I was just about your age," she said, "I was witness to a rooster attack. That little banty bird dug its spurs into a man's groin. Them spurs," she said, "was sharp and twining." And then she described how that little rooster—with wings a pounding, its blood red comb wobbling all at once in all directions, had backstroked clean across the chicken yard dragging that man with it. "When that man crawled home," she said, "whole town knew he was done for with his wife."

There were no consequences for this—a story that fell out of order. There would always be someone to hear it again told another way.

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When the shadows flung apart my grandma's garden, Uncle Jess was out, probably wild turkey hunting with Mr. Peck. It was a Sunday, a late summer afternoon. Bish was alone. But not afraid. For protection, she had her banty hens and rooster and the Confederate boot pistol Mr. Peck had given her. The pistol was kept on the kitchen table folded into a dish towel. With her chickens raising a ruckus, she grabbed that towel—though she wasn't quite sure how she'd need to use that pistol—and she planted it in her flower basket.

Pontius Pilot was bucking, the police car was humming, and a man with a long shadow was standing outside her summer kitchen. He didn't try to hide himself. He was a tall man who stood tall. He wore a police

uniform. So, when Bish stepped between him and the door, first thing she said, official like, was, “Step away easy from that rain barrel.” And, as he did, her hens settled back to tossing dust onto their rusty feathers.

“What brings you here?” asked Bish.

The man turned the pleasant side of his face toward her, but as she moved past to look him in the eyes, she could see he had scissors for lips, one corner more upturned than the other. He spoke out the down side and called her by name. “I’m in terrible need Miss Bishop...” His chin twisted tighter into his Adam’s apple as his eyes swept past her, following a line of sight above her head. Centaury and cockscomb hung from the kitchen ceiling. Open cabinets showed matches and candles, potholders and dishtowels, mortars and pestles. Folded aprons. Blocks of paraffin. An aluminum pail. A pressure cooker. A jellmeter. Stacks of jelly bags. Jelly glasses, lids, rims. Honey comb. Dried herbs. Roots. Stirrers of all sorts. Her water cup.

“You’ve a reputation,” he said and stepped past her through the open door. For years, the jelly women of Pavo County had won ribbons at the Georgia State Fair. They were not just the first prize winners, but comprised the complete purse of winners and runners-up for jelly making. Bish could not remember a time, since she’d gotten into the jelly business, when the Pavo women had not won.

As the man moved about her kitchen, uninvited, the sun spilled onto the stovetop. A pan sat on an unlit burner. A bottle of denatured alcohol sat to its side. Leaning an elbow onto a countertop, like he might do at home, he looked full at her for the first time. “I’ve heard, if you had a mind to, you could turn a frog to jelly—*prize jelly*—the kind of jelly that’ll take *all* them prizes...”

When Bish said *frog jelly*, I busted out laughing. But when the man had said it, Bish had just stood quiet, smothered in the long green shadow of his uniform. Since the food editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* had taken a look back at the best jelly makers in Georgia, jelly selling had taken a funny turn. Low on inventory, Bish had put limits on how many glasses folks could buy and, next, she’d raised prices. It only brought her more buyers. They asked for everything. But *frog jelly*? Maybe he’d laid eyes on her potion stirrers, a fistful of mineralized frog leg bones grouped upright in a jar. She looked straight at him, and “*Hell...*” is what she said.

His fingers crawled among her mixtures and her toes itched. His face flushed and she felt the cut of his lopsided smile. Then words dropped out of the downside of his mouth, like peach stones. “There are laws against profanity, M’am.”

Outside, the air was cooling. The hens were rumbling. Inside, there was a struggle to come to terms. Bish felt the weight of her flower basket and said, “Well, then?”

“I’m fixing to be the next sheriff of Pensacola,” he said. “Wouldn’t do no harm to see my missus in the papers.” As if on cue, a girl appeared at the door. The would-be sheriff looked to Bish. “Don’t worry,” he said. “She don’t want to be no Georgia jelly winner. I’m set on her being the next Pensacola Cake Bake Champion.”

It was true: A prize woman might make him sheriff. The prize-winning jelly makers of Pavo County, Georgia, got write-ups in all the local papers, and it had done the jelly selling business good. So much good, it seemed, that whatever the papers said, it furthered HERE WE HAVE IT sales. Without a slow-down, Bish figured she’d be out of jelly and out of business soon.

Latching onto the deputy’s pinky finger, the girl said, “We’re fixing to marry.” Bish suffered a second round of belly pangs that day. The bride-to-be was red-eyed, like she’d been crying, and she could be no more than fifteen.

And, what had they truly come for? There’d been growing rumors. Accusations. It seemed all of Georgia was in a fuss about the State Fair jelly prizes. The *Constitution’s* two-page photo spread, featuring Pavo County women dicing fruit and straining juices, had stirred up a spate of letter writing—letters to the editor, letters to the governor—all from disgruntled jelly makers, losers from other parts of the state. Within days, *The Atlanta Constitution*, the same that had celebrated Pavo County, was calling for a State jelly investigation.

“How much jelly work, you done?” she asked the girl.

“Some,” she said.

Bish looked straight to the deputy and rolled her eyes to her cellar. The man nodded in turn toward the heavy iron ring hinged to the floorboards. “What’s that there?” he asked. Bish set down her flower basket, hauled up on the door in the floor. He followed her down.

**story continues / end of excerpts**