

## A Peach A Day

sacha laroque

**T**he sun cooked Peach Jones' skin as she raked through the driest soil she'd ever worked with. Her rubber boots—black, no longer shiny, creaking—were planted, and she appeared unbothered by the prospect that the earth might, at some point, decide to swallow her whole. But her mind was elsewhere, focusing on leveling the soil where the Romas would go, and the hours of labour she still had left.

She then daydreamed, as she often did, of Arlo, who she knew got to sleep in. She could envision him spending the entire morning denting their couch. Justified, of course, by his sore back. He used this time to prepare for his daily meetings with the neighbouring farmers, which ran at the chapel on the corner of their street. Peach was bitter about them since they were exclusive to male farmers. She wondered how Arlo could even attend as he hadn't been out in the fields once since they moved in. He was no farmer. But a man? That he was, and that's what mattered.

Eventually, all Peach could focus on were her multiplying sun blisters. They burned holes into the furrowed skin between her eyebrows, reminiscent of a cow who's suffered the fate of a stun gun. She was a bruised-looking Peach, one that'd been left at the bottom of the grocery store shelf. That's how she felt anyway. But she didn't let these blisters bother her too much. If anything, they distracted her from the burn that spread within: the one ignited by loneliness, by isolation.

She squinted at the vacant sky. A crow cawed, flying in above her, hidden by the rays of the blinding sun. It cawed again, but soon quieted once he saw Peach carelessly lift her hoe only to plunge it into the soil again and again. The soil barely budged. He then watched her wobble over to another spot, where she once again made no progress with the seemingly unworkable soil. Her feet weren't doing well; ill-fitting boots and endless labour demolished her.

The crow had taken a liking to her. Perhaps it was how helpless she was, how much the woman reminded the crow of an injured rabbit he could sink his claws into. But

he didn't want to hurt her. In the way of all scavengers, he was anxious to see how her story might end. He thus kept a watchful eye as she was compressed in each direction by the endless stretch of soil and air.

The crow then turned his gaze towards Arlo, who was also watching Peach, the way a cat watches a mouse, from behind a corner so they won't see anything coming. The crow's beady, black eyes focused on her hopping, which it knew rendered her vulnerable, susceptible to an attack from her predator. Arlo was standing in the living room, his lip grazing the glass window he'd been watching his wife through, the condensation making the glass tear up. A corded telephone was glued to both his left ear and hand, the loops of the cord stretched almost straight. His eyes burned through the glass, never disrupted by so much as a blink of an eye.

The fact of the matter was that Arlo could only operate normally when Peach was out working, because she wouldn't be around to nag about his meetings. Nor could she disrupt his phone calls or notice that his back wasn't really shot. It wasn't because he couldn't help her that he wasn't out there. It was because he didn't want to. He had other, more pressing matters to attend to. Like preparing for his meetings. The crow's eyes glimmered as it watched the corners of Arlo's mouth lift into a smile, before ending the call and disappearing from view.

Upon moving to Rock Chapel, Peach feared neighbouring farmers would lament her and her husband's presence since it might trigger an impending competitiveness. However, their income was as low as their labour and production, so their neighbours worried for nothing. It seemed any efforts they, or really just Peach, poured into the land only contributed to its demise. When they bought the property, the soil was fertile, nurtured, and hydrated. But by the following week, everything was incurably lifeless and infertile: the grass now yellowish, the trees reduced to scaly spines, the endless dirt clumping together from the dryness. And eventually, Peach became the human embodiment of their circumstances: incurably lifeless and infertile. She figured God was punishing them for something yet to occur. All she wanted was a child to care for, someone to love and be loved by. But it was an impossible feat, and this worsened the state of her and Arlo's marriage until it, too, was reduced to a naked, meatless spine.

The crow, bored of the stillness of the scene, flew off towards the sun that lasered through Peach's clothing. After a few more hours, she could only focus on the perspiration that was pooling everywhere. She didn't think she'd ever finish the job, especially not in her condition. Especially not alone.

"Missus Jones?"

She turned around. A man sporting stained overalls and fingerless gloves stood about twenty meters from her buried boots. His eyes were wide, beady like the crow's, but stretched by an invisible speculum. They were red, unblinking, burning holes into the vacant scenery.

“That’s me. You are?”

The man’s strides toward her were noticeably large. Once in front of her, he stretched his hand out expectantly. The uncovered skin was red and scarred, and in his other hand hung a dirty hammer. The crow screeched from far away: this was a distressing cry different from his habitual cawing.

“Pardon, me, Missus Jones. I’m Levi. My farm’s five minutes down the road. I’ve lived here in Rock Chapel my whole life.” He coughed hoarsely into his palm after shaking hers. When he lifted his head, she saw blood droplets splattered on his glove.

She admittedly hadn’t seen much of Rock Chapel, but then again, she hadn’t had the time to explore. She took care of everything: the farm, their home, the animals. Arlo only took care of their finances, but mostly because a woman would never be granted such responsibilities.

“You can call me Peach. Missus Jones makes me sound old. Is there anything I can do for ‘ya?”

He was missing several teeth, but his smile still stretched from his right ear to his left: the spitting image of a Cheshire cat.

“Your husband’s a good friend of mine, actually. He uh...” he shuffled his feet, his gaze falling to the ground. “He asked me to come and help ‘ya.”

She cocked an eyebrow. Despite being a man of few words, Arlo surely would’ve told her he’d hired a farmhand. He certainly should’ve. But there were few things Arlo discussed with Peach. She oftentimes had to talk to herself for advice.

Peach pursed her lips as she peered over at the house. “It’s odd he’s never mentioned you, don’t you think?”

Levi sighed. “Look,” he said. “It’s already midday. I get the defensiveness, trust me. You really have to be careful who you can trust these days. But I’m here to help—I know Arlo’s back is all... you know. Listen, all I am is a friendly neighbour, helping out some new farmers. I know it’s tough out here.” He never blinked, not once.

She wasn’t used to kindness, nor inclined to accept it so blindly. But it was hardly ever offered. And she wasn’t in the position to refuse it at this point. “All right. Grab a spade. It’s by the shed back there.” She lazily pointed to her right. “I’m going to fix up the ground where the potatoes are going.”

The crow circled them as they burned under the persistent sun. Peach would never admit this to anyone, but she enjoyed having a partner to work with. Levi never blinked, and he swore a lot, and he also whistled songs she’d never heard, off-key at that. But he was helping her. And during this, she almost forgot how badly everything hurt, burned. She hated the heat.

They planted three rows of Romas, each perfectly spaced out. Peach lamented the reality that the soil was still in desperate condition and that her labour may never grow into anything, but she had a friend. He might’ve been her husband’s friend

beforehand, but she decided that now, he'd be hers too.

"You know, I appreciate the help, Levi. I really do. These days I don't get much of it." Peach smiled fondly as she said this.

"Ah, don't mention it." He unscrewed the lid of his jug, pouring the contents directly down his throat.

"So, you're friends with my husband?" Peach was in a prying mood. She hosed down the Romas, cementing them into place.

"Oh yeah. The guys and I are real tight here. Arlo's the green bean, but he's fitting right in. He's a good man, that one. Plus, s'always good to have some new blood in town." He resumed whistling, and the crow mimicked his song. The two harmonized unknowingly.

Peach felt jealousy burn in the pit of her stomach. She wished she was a man. She fantasized of this sometimes: of having her own farm, in her own name. She wouldn't need a husband; she'd do everything on her own. She'd find a wife, maybe. But she wouldn't make her work nearly as hard as she did, though.

"A wife..." She spoke without thinking. "Uh, do you have one? A wife?"

He ceased whistling to answer her: "I did." His gaze fell towards the ground. His feet were not buried like hers were.

Peach turned the hose off and removed her soiled gloves. "You did?"

"But she was killed. In a fire," he blinked.

She looked towards the sun as she said, "That's a horrible way to go."

After several hours, every inch of the soil had been ploughed, fertilized, and either prepared for planting or successfully planted. The pair made their way to the barn to return the day's equipment. Peach decided she enjoyed Levi's presence. She wondered if Arlo would be awake because she felt like asking her new work partner to come eat roast beef with them.

"I gotta take a leak," Levi blurted. "I'm just gonna step out." Peach continued to the barn, her cheeks burning as his strides came to an abrupt halt at the end of his freshly ploughed row.

It was time for Peach to arrange her tools in the shed, as she did at the end of every workday. She decided this would also be the best time to plan out how she'd ask her new friend to join them for dinner. She hadn't had a guest over before, because Levi didn't like people in his space, and the friends he did make, he never introduced to his wife. He was an awfully private, possessive person. But not of Peach. She was just a woman who happened to be married to him.

The crow followed her, perching himself up on the exterior windowsill, peering through the window grills. His beak periodically knocked on the window, as if he were asking Peach to let him in. But other than this, he was solemn.

He watched Peach speak to herself: “Levi, won’t you—no, that’s way too formal, Peach. Levi!” she feigned this exciting interaction, giggling to herself. “Don’t you just love a good pot roast? Well, guess what?” She hung her gloves up. “I happen to have a whole hunk in my fridge!” Then the scythe and the sickle.

She drowned everything out—all but her mock-conversation. This was most important to her. She didn’t hear the crow’s abrupt cawing, nor the second pair of feet, whose strides took them directly behind her.

She ignored this, imagining the sorts of conversations they’d have. Perhaps he’d end up liking her more than her husband. Peach and Levi against Arlo, against the world. Or maybe Levi could convince Arlo to help, and maybe they’d all be friends. Perhaps they’d even let her come to their meetings. Maybe they’d let all the wives come for once.

“See, my husband and I—we don’t normally have guests.” She said this as Levi lifted his pitchfork. She absentmindedly slipped the dirty hammer into the drawer. “So, we’d love it if you’d be our—”

And then he plunged the pitchfork into her back. Again, and again, like hay. The barn filled with a screaming song, amplified by the crow outside who screeched as though he, too, were getting pitched. He could no longer see her, and she could no longer see anything. And so, they screamed until their voices gave out. Soon after, the barn was filled solely by the celebratory voices of long-time friends who had won their favourite game.

The crow, voiceless, flew above Levi and Arlo’s as they dragged Peach across the freshly planted rows. Arlo was a walking miracle: his health issues—healed, gone within a single day! Peach’s body was then dumped into the ground she had spent all day pouring herself into. The crow had seen Levi help Peach dig her own grave.

Soon all he could see of Peach was her rubber boots, sticking out of the abyss. The sun never ceased blazing them, nor the crow, who sat atop them defensively every single day that followed until he reluctantly flew away, heartbroken that he would never see her again.

As the hellish heat finally lead into early September, Arlo welcomed the abundant harvesting of this summer’s work. He tenderly thought of all he had had to sacrifice to be where he ended up. The work, the thought, the care he had poured into his dream farm. He was in the middle of giving his nightly speech at the chapel when a myriad of crows began to circle the building. No man noticed for they were distracted by their assumed common superiority.

“I want to give a special thanks,” Arlo started, lifting his beer to the dozens of raised cans around him, “to every single one of you. You have all supported me, shown me the way, helped me get rid of the problems that’ve held me back. Like women. Mine was an infertile one who never shut up, at that. To have been able to receive this support in my extermination has been necessary. Levi has helped me, like many of

you, fix my life. God is real, and he is a man.”

Levi chimed in, “No kidding! Can’t trust em’ women to do anything,” to which they all freed roaring laughs that came from deep inside their potbellies.

Arlo continued “Levi started off this movement by getting rid of his Linda. And, you know, he’s really paid the price for that.” The farmers stifled their anger at the thought of a man suffering at the hands of a woman. They all shot quick glances at Levi’s hands, who would perpetually hold a reminder of the fire he killed his wife with. Arlo examined his own, which would he noted would forever be stained by the earth and its blood. They only lamented at how late in life their processes of extermination occurred. If only they’d known Levi sooner.

“But one at time, he’s come into our lives, and taught us that there’s a way out. We don’t need to be shackled by them no more. Here’s to us! To the men of Rock Chapel. Cheers to reclaiming our manhood and getting rid of whatever threatens it!”

And with that, they all cheered to natural fertilization and life insurance policies—which is how they all afforded their lifestyles now—before the perpetual cycle of polishing off, and cracking open a fresh one, ensued. They were so busy celebrating, dancing, and drinking their livers into despair, that they hadn’t noticed the crow who’d broken in through the stained-glass window, who’d begun watching their every move. It had a particular disdain for rowdiness.

They hadn’t noticed, either, when the crow tipped over one of the red votive candles at the altar. And while they were too busy funneling booze down their throats, fire caught, as it always does. It wasn’t long before it was further ignited by the men’s spilled alcohol. The air thickened with smoke and screams. The chapel had been overcome by mayhem; the men, just moments before celebratory of their bond, now ran over each other’s crowded bodies, pushing, pulling, fighting for themselves only.

The crow cawed thrice, her eyes illuminated by the exploding orange and red, her song harmonized with their screams. And then it used its wings to fly out of the hellfire. It flew all the way to Peach’s farm, where it found solace above her rubber boots. So, it stayed there, every day, right above her, watchful in case any man come and disrupt their peace.