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Lizard Jelly
by Candi Chu

I don't know who called the police and I don't know if it was even all that necessary—she would've wound down in her own good time. But I do know Myrtle Plunk didn't come to the office that Monday morning with the intention of going berserk. We grew up together here in River Falls, Alabama and I know for a fact that not once in Myrtle's 58 years on this earth has she ever done anything that would brand her as a crazy. She's flat shoes and cotton panties, Redbook magazine and one beer a week on Saturday night.

"The incident" (as Penny Panderkin later called it in her company-wide memo) was really nothing more than a sneeze to Myrtle's mental health. But if Myrtle had insanity's head cold, I had its plague. It wasn't working at Aunt Penny's Homemade Jellies and Preserves that drove us nuts; it was the daily waiting: waiting for a promotion, waiting for a man to take care of us like our mamas said would happen, waiting for a thank-you note written by our children and signed by the world. We—Myrtle and me—dreamed of rewards for our longtime loyalty. "I've Worked All My Life" was the bumper sticker on our pension-paid Cadillacs headed for the golden years. But on that Monday we realized we had no air in our dreams. We were driving the High Hopes highway on four flat tires.

It started like this:

Friday at noon we sat in the employee cafeteria eating lunch, watching Jimmy Bowen make a fool of himself at the candy bar machine.

"Look at him," Myrtle said. "He's dropped in five quarters already for a fifty-cent Hershey bar." She took a bite out of her sandwich—Bama peanut butter and Aunt Penny's peach jelly. She always brings her lunch; she doesn't believe in dropping quarters into a candy bar machine.

"Do you believe that?" she said. "He's just gonna walk away from that machine without a fight. It's easy come, easy go with these young people."

Jimmy Bowen approached a table of young guys and slapped one on the back. "Thank God it's Friday, huh?" he said, loud and confident.

Since my husband passed on, I've never really cared much for Fridays, even though most people live for them. They feel too much like when the movie screen goes white after the final credit.

Myrtle reached inside her pocketbook and pulled out a red change purse. "I bet I've got more in here than he has in his savings. That is if he even has a savings account."

"Look at this." I pulled a ham biscuit and an apple out of a white paper bag. "Ninety-five cents. Should've been a dollar twenty but I got a Senior Citizens Discount over at Roscoe's."

"Twenty-five cents." She tilted her chin up. "A whole quarter for admitting you're old."

"I asked the girl did she want to see my driver's license and she said, 'No, I can tell'."

"Roscoe's got some nerve. Went to school with us." She opened a sin-

gle-serving carton of milk and stuck a straw in it. "The man owns a convenience store and now he's telling the world who's fit for full price and who's not."

"That girl could've at least pretended to want to see my driver's license." I unwrapped my biscuit; it was cold.

"Ow!" Myrtle dropped her sandwich.

"What's wrong?"

"It's my tooth." She rubbed her finger across her back molar.

"I told you about all that sugar." She loves Aunt Penny's jelly. I swear, if it wouldn't kill her, that's all she'd eat every meal. "You ought to go see somebody about—"

"Naah." She took her finger out of her mouth and pushed up her bifocals with her pinky. "I don't need to go see somebody. Don't tell me what to do."

I ate the rest of my ham biscuit and waited until mid-apple before I spoke. Sometimes it's best to give Myrtle a window of quiet to cool down. "You hear from Jessie lately?"

She smiled. She always picks up when she talks about her daughter.

"Finally found an apartment," she said. "I must've promised God a year of Sundays for that one."

"I don't see how you survived. Her all the way up there in New York City and no place definite to live, why, I'd've been out of my mind with worry. At least my boy stayed in the area, if you call an eight-hour drive to Atlanta in the area."

"Did you know she's been up there two years now and she's already on her fourth job? Her *fourth*." She finished drinking the milk and folded down the top of the carton. "Now like I told her last night on the phone, she's got to find herself a place with a good pension plan and stay put."

"Amen."

"Young people don't stick with things anymore, not like we did. Look at Floyd and me, thirty-five years. I married him and I buried him. I didn't go looking for the next best thing."

Jimmy Bowen and a fellow from Shipping started roughhousing over at the other end of the cafeteria. Jimmy playfully shoved the fellow up against the wall and knocked loose a framed picture of Elmer Panderkin, the company's founder.

"Watch it!" Myrtle jumped up and stretched her arms toward the picture, her two-foot reach pitted against the forty-foot distance across the room.

Jimmy caught the picture by its corner and slapped it back on the wall. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket and tapped it on his palm. On his way out the screen door, Jimmy said something to the other fellow and they laughed.

Myrtle smashed the empty milk carton with her fist. "They don't plan ahead I tell you, he doesn't even think about getting a tumor the size of a grapefruit but I know what'll happen—" She wagged her finger at the screen door. "Go on Jimbo, smoke that coffin nail, just wait and see—"

"Sit down," I said. "He was only playing."

"That's the problem with Jimbo Bowen. He's always 'only playing.'"

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She sat down. Her double-knit pants pouched at the stomach. Two years ago, she went to Fabric City, bought a half dozen See 'N Sew patterns and introduced pants to her closet of dresses and skirts.

"Elmer Panderkin was a fine, Southern gentleman," she said. "Remember when this place was Uncle Elmer's Homemade Goodies?"

I nodded.

"Mr. Panderkin really didn't want women working here at first, he was old-fashioned that way," she said. "He thought it would make us hard and mean. I've been here thirty-nine years." She placed her hand on top of mine and squeezed. "It hasn't made me hard and mean, has it?"

"Not a bit, honey." Her grip tightened, welding my fingers. "Not a bit."

She stared across the room at the picture of a white-suited Elmer Panderkin standing in front of his 22-room antebellum mansion.

"You know," she said, "I wish with all my heart I could jump inside that picture and begin living my life alongside his."

On Friday afternoons the factory smells like a fresh-baked peach pie. We focus on and produce a different flavor each day of the week: Mondays, apple; Tuesdays, grape; Wednesdays, raspberry; Thursdays, blackberry; Fridays, peach. I don't need a calendar anymore, just a taste of the air and I know what day it is.

We keep four 500-gallon galvanized steel vats running at a full rolling boil all day long. It's so hot in the factory I tie a bandana round my forehead to keep sweat from dripping into my eyes. Walking into the factory is like walking into a clothesline full of hot, sugary sheets; the harder you twist to free yourself, the more you get tangled up in the juicy heat.

It's about a hundred times hotter in here than it is outside and on dog days in Alabama, like today, the inside of this factory could make the fire-and-brimstone of hell feel like an air-conditioned room at the Holiday Inn. I've never killed anybody or stolen anything but here I am in the jelly factory.

"Cordy, put that down."

Myrtle snatched the book out of my hands.

"You're supposed to be peeling peaches right now." She studied the book's cover. "'Advanced Biology'? What's this?"

"It's Jimmy's," I answered and cracked open a crate of peaches. "He's taking night classes at the junior college, working on a business degree."

"What's biology got to do with business?"

I dragged over an empty gray garbage drum for the peels. "You know, I understood what's in that book, I really did." I slit a peach, peeled off a hand-sized layer of skin and dropped it in the garbage drum. "I'm not such an old dog, I've got a few new tricks."

Myrtle snapped on a pair of plastic gloves and began peeling peaches alongside me. She didn't have to do this; she was promoted to Quality Control Supervisor four years ago and even has a desk in the main building.

I've been working here 37 years and still haven't risen above the factory. "You're too valuable on the vats," they keep telling me at my annual

employee evaluations but over time, I've realized "too valuable" is code for "ain't going nowhere". Myrtle keeps telling me to hang on, they'll promote me one day and I've followed her advice. I followed like a blindfolded child at a birthday party, spun by a friend, reaching out and pinning my hopes on a disoriented donkey.

"I wish I had more school." Myrtle brushed the corner of her eye with the back of her plastic glove. "I always thought Jessie might come back, might even want to get hired on here—I could've put in a good word for her—but do you know that girl never once considered moving back here to River Falls?"

"My boy neither." I tossed a peel in the garbage drum.

"Didn't even *consider* it." She crushed a peach in her hand. Yellow-gold clumps of pulp dribbled down her plastic glove, leaving a shine like Quik-Wax on a car. "Four years of tuition payments -"

"Six for me."

She peeled off her gloves and slapped them on the table. Pulp splattered her glasses. "Sometimes I feel like I worked so I could pay that college to kidnap my child. And lord have mercy, I don't have enough years left in me to pay the ransom."

A lizard skittered across the floor.

"How did that thing get in here?" I tossed a peach peel at it. The peel skidded across the floor collecting a sheet of gray dust on its underside.

Myrtle chased the creature over to the temperature control panel but it climbed up a water pipe, going round and round like a red line on a barber's pole. "Got away."

I filled a hamper with peeled peaches and carried it up the safety ladder rigged to the side of vat #2. Cool rivulets of juice dripped through the wicker slats.

"Heard anymore about the sale?" I had to holler over the whirring of the motorized burners.

"National's put in the highest bid as far as I know," Myrtle yelled back.

I dumped the peaches into the bubbling mixture of sugar, pectin and lemon juice. "I thought all they did was dog food and cereal," I hollered and climbed down the ladder.

Vat #2 rumbled. Myrtle jumped. She glanced at the temperature control panel: the heating gauge's red line registered 15° above boiling; jelly should be kept at 8° above boiling.

Myrtle worked the control, waiting to click back in to the safety zone. She reminded me of us when we were kids, when she would take control of the radio dial, twisting it, working it until she found *The Shadow*.

"Another close one," she said and unclenched the control dial. "Eight degrees above and holding steady." She climbed the safety ladder on Vat #2, unclipped a four-foot metal spoon from the rim and dipped it into the boiling brew, stirring a whirlpool of peach chunks and sugar. She lifted the spoon and dangled it over the vat.

"Sheets off the spoon o.k.," she called down to me. Drops hung off and glided together at the spoon's tip. "Thought we might've scalded this batch but it looks fine."

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Jimmy Bowen, wearing a red short-sleeved shirt and khaki pants, danced into the factory. He held a clipboard against his hip. "Good afternoon, ladies," he said.

"Hi, Mr. Bowen," I said. Jimmy is only 24 years old but the minute he was promoted from the jelly vats to Assistant Manager, he insisted we all call him "Mr. Bowen". Frankly, I think Myrtle should've gotten his chance but who knows, maybe if this place sells, the new owners will see what's what around here.

"What brings you all the way down here, Jimbo?" Myrtle asked.

He bristled. "Penny wants to see you and Cordy in her office first thing Monday morning." He removed a pen from behind his ear and wrote something on the clipboard.

"What for?" Myrtle asked.

"How should I know?" He turned his back to her. "Why should I care?"

The lizard skimmed along the windowsill behind Vat #2 and jumped off, wag-tagging across the bare concrete floor.

Jimmy spotted the lizard and chased it. "Whoop, whoop!" He waved an imaginary lasso overhead and bucked on a wild dream-stallion, turning the factory floor into a backyard playing field for a game of Cowboys and Indians. He snagged the creature, held it by its tail against his red shirt and approached Myrtle in an exaggerated bowlegged strut. "Hey look, it's turning red," he said.

"Put that lizard down," she said.

"It's a *chameleon*."

"My, my, my. Chameleon's a mighty fancy word for someone named Jim-bo."

"Cut it Myrtle." He dropped the lizard. "I'm *Mr. Bowen*."

"Not til you've earned it you're not."

Jimmy tapped the pen on his clipboard. "You want me to earn it, I'll earn it." He kicked the garbage drum full of peach peels toward Myrtle. "Go out and dump this," he said, "it smells."

She glared at him. He hitched his pants and rubbed his thumb over a belt buckle the color of fool's gold.

"Don't make me write you up," he warned.

In the pecking order of Aunt Penny's Jellies and Preserves, an Assistant Manager can peck the hell out of a Quality Control Supervisor.

Myrtle heaved the garbage drum onto her back. Her knees buckled slightly. "One of these days, Jimbo," she said, "you're gonna learn to say 'lizard' like the rest of us."

Monday, 8:00 a.m., Myrtle and I sat waiting to enter Penny Panderkin's office.

"Ow."

"Your tooth?" I asked.

Myrtle nodded.

"Why don't you go see someone?" I did a double-take sniff; she had Aunt Penny's apple jelly on her breath.

"I don't like those x-ray machines." She pulled a lace handkerchief from

her pocketbook and touched it to her jaw, below her bad molar. "Why can't they just poke around in there and feel if something's loose or rotten? Doc Henry used to—"

"Doc Henry's dead."

"I know that." She twisted the lace handkerchief until it looked like a knotted bedsheet thrown out the window of a burning building.

The door opened. "Myrtle? Cordy?" Penny Panderkin, a young, stylish woman who walks like the river runs, invited us into her office. Next to her, I felt like I was riding a bicycle with square wheels. She graced the room like a perfumed mist; I blasted in like steam from a kettle of collard greens.

"I'm sure you've heard the rumors," Penny said and invited us to sit down in two straightbacked chairs facing her desk. "And since you two have worked here longer than anyone else, I thought it only decent to tell you face-to-face." She cleared her throat and settled into a leather chair behind her desk.

"We've been sold?" Myrtle asked.

"National Food Corporation offered top dollar." Penny leaned forward, braced her forearms on the desk. A diamond tennis bracelet glittered on her thin, tanned wrist. She picked up a pen and worked it through her fingers like a majorette's baton. "Bottom line: National's bringing in their own people. Naturally, they'll downsize current staff."

"Downsize?" I said.

"Get rid of people," Myrtle explained. "Last hired, first fired." I thought I saw the tremor of a smile on her face. "That Jimmy Bowen could get on my nerves," she said, "but I really hate to see the kid get the ax."

"Jimmy won't be leaving," Penny said. "You will." She touched the pen to her diamond bracelet the way a percussionist tings a triangle at just the right moment.

Myrtle half-rose from her chair. "But I worked for your grandfather, your father...Cordy here did too."

"That's no guarantee of anything anymore. Times have changed and business has changed to keep up."

I sat in shock, afraid to speak, afraid my words would spill from an incontinent mouth. Myrtle and I had been passed along by the Panderkins, generation to generation, like a couple of loyal field hands.

"A professional employment counselor will be here this afternoon to speak to those employees who've been terminated." Penny looked above our heads and spoke to the back of the room as if she were speaking to a large audience. "We really do have your best interest at heart."

"Terminated..." Myrtle slumped in her chair.

"I know this is unsettling." Penny stood and silently commanded us to stand also. "I'm sure you'll find opportunities. I wish you the best of luck."

Myrtle grabbed Penny's thin arm. "Please don't do this to us, please, you have the power to—"

"The decision is final." Penny freed her arm. "The deal has been

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made.”

“I can’t go out there.” Myrtle said, “What’ll I do, how’ll I get on? This is all I know.”

Penny firmly ushered us outside. “Jason Johnson will help you this afternoon,” she said and closed the door.

“Wait!” Pound, pound, pound. “Miss Panderkin, please . . .” Myrtle scratched on the closed door like a dog begging to be let in.

In the space of our twenty-minute meeting with Penny Panderkin, Myrtle had gone from a woman too skittish for dental x-rays to a woman fearlessly exposing herself to emotional radioactivity.

On the way out of the main building, we passed Jimmy Bowen’s sunny office.

“I need to stop at my desk,” Myrtle said. I followed her to her cubicle. I accidentally knocked over a cup of pencils, their erasers chewed off, their points unsharpened.

“I can’t remember what I came in here to get,” she said.

“It’s all right honey.” I rubbed her shoulders. I looked down at the gray-haired head of my best friend. Thirty-nine years she had worked here and not once had she felt the afternoon sun spill in across her working hands.

I understood it all now, just as I had understood that Biology textbook, and I didn’t know how to change it. Windows were reserved for the strong and in the Darwinian cage of office politics, Jimmy Bowen had evolved into a canary and Myrtle Plunk into a day-old newspaper lining its cage.

“Maybe Penny was right. There’s bound to be opportunities out there for us. We’ve got experience, know-how.” Myrtle spoke our qualifications with the dogged assurance of a woman who, having found a lump in her breast, slowly convinces herself no doctor is necessary. “Maybe this employment guy can really help us.”

We sat in folding chairs with a crowd of co-workers in the employee cafeteria. Jimmy Bowen and Penny Panderkin stood like sentinels in the back of the room.

A slender, well-dressed man in his late twenties, stepped up to the podium and adjusted the microphone. “Good afternoon. My name is Jason Johnson.” A feedback buzz whined round the room then died out. “I know you’re all aware that National Food Corporation has acquired Aunt Penny’s Homemade Jellies and Preserves,” he said. “National Food has contracted me to act as an employment counselor on its behalf. I’m here today to help facilitate your transition from this working environment into a viable job market.”

“See? I knew he was going to help us find work,” Myrtle whispered to me.

Jason Johnson certainly sounded like he knew what he was talking about. No fat, no wrinkles in his suit, no sag in his posture, no hesitation in his words—even his name sounded snappy and efficient.

“ . . . matching your skills to the needs of employers,” he said. “Who in

here has been with Aunt Penny's the longest?"

All heads turned and looked at Myrtle. She proudly raised her hand.

"And how long have you worked here?" he asked.

"Thirty-nine years. Dependable as the sunrise." A few of us applauded her. She smiled and didn't break eye contact with Jason Johnson; she awaited his compliment of her lifetime of service.

The "Thank you" was on her lips when he sneered at the microphone. "I wouldn't hire anyone who's stayed in one place for thirty-nine years," he said. "You're obviously not a motivated worker."

"Motivated?"

"In today's workplace, you've got to go, go, go to get anywhere."

"Well in my day—" her fist trembled "—you had to stay, stay, stay to get anywhere."

"Your day is over."

When the talk ended, Penny Panderkin thanked Jason Johnson for his time.

She never thanked Myrtle or me.

♦ ♦ ♦

Hobbling at first then breaking into a frenetic stride, Myrtle ran to the factory and turned up the temperature control dials for Vats #1, #2, #3 and #4 beyond the Danger level. The vats roared.

I chased her. "Wait!" I tripped over a crate of apples, fell and banged my chin on the concrete floor. I tasted blood on my tongue.

"Stay away from me!" Myrtle grabbed a metal dipper and lumbered up the safety ladder on Vat #2. The jelly overheated, boiling into slimy waves of mush.

"Come down from there, you're gonna get hurt!"

"Going to get hurt?" She waved the metal dipper overhead, left to right, left to right, as if fine-tuning a television antennae. "How can you hurt what's just been killed?"

Penny Panderkin and Jimmy Bowen breezed into the factory.

"What's going on, what's she doing up there?" Penny asked me.

"Hey Penny!" Myrtle plunged the dipper into the vat and slung about a gallon of scalding jelly at her.

Penny screamed and sidestepped the blazing arc of liquefied sugar and apples. Beside her foot, a puddle of burnt jelly sizzled on the concrete floor.

"Myrtle, *calm down!*" Jimmy yelled up at her.

"*Calm down?*" Myrtle barked out a laugh. "All right, I'll calm down." She climbed to the ladder's top rung; her body teetered over the vat's seething, molten mixture.

"Somebody needs to call the police," Penny said.

At that moment, a lizard skittered along the windowsill behind the vat. Myrtle leaned unsteadily toward it. Billows of steam burped up from the vat, matting her hair and marbling her skin in streams of sweat.

"Myrtle, please!" Penny yelled. "Try to understand—"

"I *do* understand," Myrtle yelled back. Then she grabbed the lizard, raised it overhead and threw it down into the vat of spluttering jelly.

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“Did you see that?” Penny shrieked. “She threw a live animal in there!”
“This has gone far enough, I’m putting a stop to this,” Jimmy said.
“So, little Jim-bo wants to be a he-ro,” Myrtle singsonged.
He moved toward the safety ladder.
Myrtle leaned over the steaming, roaring vat. She filled the dipper with hot jelly and slung it at Jimmy,
He fell backward.
His body landed across my feet.
The searing liquid nailed me in the face.
“Oh God Cordy Oh God Cordy Oh God Oh God!”

They didn’t have to call the police. I could’ve told them Myrtle was never out to hurt anyone. And besides, if they were arresting for hurt that day, the police should’ve arrested Aunt Penny’s Homemade Jellies and Preserves.

I lost the right side of my face and almost my right eye. Like I told Myrtle, I look like a movie star now: The Phantom of the Opera. I’d rather look like Elizabeth Taylor, but wouldn’t we all?

Myrtle checked into Bryce’s, the mental hospital. I went up to Tuscaloosa to visit her; it’s real quiet there, all white coats and soft talk. They give her medication to calm her down. She doesn’t like the food.

I hope while she’s there they make her go see a dentist.

HP