

**(Select pages from)**

PEACHES FOR SALE

A novel by Leslie Wisdom

**CORN** I haven't spoken for 26 years. Not a syllable. Even to myself. Not out loud, anyways. I've had thoughts, of course. Lots of them, inside my mind. But no conversations. I suppose most people would agree that a conversation inside of someone's head is just a one-way street and if it's not, then they ought to get that head checked. But I don't fall into that category, and you're just going to need to take my word on that. But I'm a pretty good conversationalist, truth be told. It takes a good listener to have a good conversation, and listening is the thing I do best. I can focus real intent on someone, no matter what they're saying. I suppose it's because I genuinely find people interesting. I've got a good memory too, and people appreciate that. They'd say, Hey Corn (shortened from Cornelius by our high school football announcer the night we beat the Tibert Lancers and I had a particularly good game. Things were happening so fast on the field, and I had the ball so many times, he couldn't keep up, so he shortened it to "Corn," and it stuck. And the next game, and every game afterwards, people brought corn husks spray painted in our purple and gold, and waved them in the stands. And I've got to admit, I thought that was something. It's one of the things my daddy talked about right up until he left this earth: the smell of hundreds of spray-painted cornstalks wafting through the stands, glowing fluorescent under the game lights in honor of his boy.) So anyway, people would say Hey Corn, remember when I told you such and so, and I'd say yes, I sure enough do. And I did. So they'd tell me more, because I'd proven myself to be a good listener. And I'm not puffing myself up when I say that I'm funny to boot. Now that's not just my opinion, I'm comparing myself to the characters in books and the folks I see on T.V. and the compliments people used to give me. I'm not bragging. I don't do that, and I don't care for folks who do. But I'm certain that I fit in the funny category pretty square. So if you combine funny, good listener, good memory and liking people, I suppose you've got yourself a darned good conversationalist. Now you'll just need to

take my word on this score, because I don't plan on proving this point any time soon. But I'm pretty sure I could blend in at the coffee shop at the long table in the corner with the guys just like I used to. If I wanted to, that is. And I don't think I'd need to knock 26 years of rust off the conversation engine, either. I believe it would just fire right up. Bam. And I'd be back. Back from where, you may wonder. But I'm not wanting to talk about that. Or anything, for that matter. Not for now. That's for sure.

**KALE** It wasn't much different when she was gone. I turned on her music, shut the door and went about my business as usual. Peaches and I took our daily walk along the river, and grocery shopped, and went to the bank. I'd been forging her signature since I was five. When night came, I turned on her lamp with the scarf draped over it, and left her door cracked ever so slightly, as she'd always done, and sit in the protective salmon colored glow that spilled into the hallway with the aching jazz. The crack was the one sure sign that I was a blip on her radar: she'd hear if I needed something. There was no other logical explanation for it. Others were a stretch, and I knew it. Did her hand linger on the cereal box where I'd touched it? Did she smile when I said that her pancakes were better than dad's? I chose to believe yes. Until Peaches' ear changed, it's what I had.

It's miraculous that I was able to keep up the façade as long as I did, especially in a small southern town. Even with my advanced abilities and quick thinking, it was a very long time. I never had to lie outright, because people didn't ask about her. They asked about us. And I answered with Peaches and I in mind, so it wasn't fibbing. But it became awkward when their concern and my sorrow still hung heavy, but enough time had passed that it wasn't appropriate to show either, in public anyways. Empathy unveiled itself subtly. Mr. Tye had a daily bone for

Peaches and a piece of jerky for me. Mrs. Richards under-charged at the register. Miss Teal let me check out more books than the library limit. That's the one I appreciated most. I took careful note of these kindnesses, wondering if any of them could parlay into the actual help that we'd need. I didn't let myself hope, at that point, but carefully assessed and calculated. Peaches started coming to school with me, and waited patiently outside the front door. It was a risk to make such a noticeable change, but I couldn't leave him alone for the whole school day, and it was a real comfort to have him with me. I decided that's what I'd say if anyone asked. I'm surprised they didn't. People surprising me has been the biggest surprise. I didn't want to become jaded, and this year cast a long shadow that threatened to darken my heart. But I chose to believe that people would do what most would say was the right thing. And mostly, they did. But when they didn't, I was genuinely surprised, and there was some comfort in that. If I was surprised, then I wasn't going to be like her.

**CORN** Arnold Palmer played the strangest sport known to man besides bowling, but he had his drink right. This I know for sure. Arnold Palmer Iced Teas, or 50-50's: fifty percent lemonade and fifty percent sweet tea, cold as a winters day, is just about the best thing that's ever graced a glass. Now, if there's no lemonade to be had, then I'll gladly take the cold sweet tea. Its Southerners milk. And I'd take a turkey sandwich on sour dough, potato salad with extra dill and a slice of lemon meringue pie without argument as well. No doubt about that. But if it's just the cold Arnold Palmer, you'll hear no complaint from me. And since everyone in town knew what I liked to eat, and since Southerners don't know what to do with themselves besides cook when times are bad – or good for that matter – well you can pretty much guess that the town plum wore a path to my door. At first, I answered. And I'd offer a glass of such and so, and

they'd oblige, or not, it didn't matter. I don't know what they said, or what I said, if anything. But the visits became less tolerable very quickly. Their sniffles and wet eyes weren't welcome. The smell of their shoe polish, and perfume, and steaming casseroles were too sentimental. And then I found out about Roux in the room with the box. And I wasn't up for it anymore. I simply could not take another word in or out. So I stopped answering, and locked the door tight. After a while, they stopped knocking. But they left the food. The deep freeze was still full from daddy's ordeal. There must've been 50 casseroles on the porch, full of flies and whatnot. And I genuinely felt bad about that. But they left more. Southerners can't help themselves. In any other part of the country, people would stop. But I'll tell you what, casserole and pie dishes piled all the way down to my driveway. Until one day, I poured them into the bucket of my tractor, drove to Shanty's farm and made a pen of pigs real happy. Then I parked the tractor at the end of the road, and hung a sign from the radiator that said "JOHNSON FARM CLOSED." That did it. In these parts, open-door is the policy. Neighbors knock, or don't, and enter pretty much no matter what. Maybe you're in the shower, or out back. But if they need some sugar, or a candle, or have some news, they well enough let themselves in, take care of business and leave a note. If the door is locked, it means you're gone for 3 days or more. The tractor move skipped all the Southern passive aggressive steps and jumped straight to east coast rude. Leave me be, said that tractor. And said I, without saying a thing. Which was what I did, from then on, for 26 years.

**KALE** Mom didn't pay attention to Peaches for the entire first year of his life. Not until his ear changed. Which, not coincidentally, is when she started to pay attention to me. They were the best months of my life, at that point, and I have Peaches right ear to thank for it. He's my best

friend, besides dad and grandpa. They gave him to me for my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, and mom ignored him the way she ignored the anniversary of my birth. She was incredibly good at providing just the right amount of energy so as not to warrant attention, though the absence of any real affection was the inherent temperature gauge. The epitome of a master passive aggressive, she showed me very early on and without question not to expect anything different or more from her. But, as with most matters of the heart, emotion often over-rides evidence, no matter how pure. And I had that in abundance.

I did, however, have plenty of affection from my tri-fecta: Peaches, dad, and grandpa. A person couldn't ask for more. And I didn't, for the most part. She perplexed me, that I admit. The absence of her attention made theirs even more meaningful, and I soaked in every moment. They knew what I needed, especially at home. I'm sure that's why Peaches happened. They worked at the garage quite a bit, and with her door closed, it got pretty lonely. When I got old enough to walk to the garage by myself, they probably tallied up the hours that I spent at dad's desk, reading and re-reading books that I'd read and re-read for months at a time. After I blew out the candles on my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday cake, dad set Peaches on my lap. I hadn't wished for him. I'd never have dreamed that I wanted or needed a dog. But just as soon as the weight and warmth of that little puppy settled onto my lap, I knew. Peaches was an unassuming mandarin-colored Beagle, docile and small for his breed, or any other, for that matter. He was full of constant, calm affection, and we were bread and butter from day one. She flat out ignored him. Couldn't even remember his name, until the cameras showed up, that is.

**CORN** If the Shout Out! Classifieds had data entered correctly, I'd have never met Kale. That's for sure. I think about that sometimes. My ad was supposed to read:

**CORN'S PEACHES AVAILABLE  
At Johnson Farm. Serve Yourself Stand open now til they're gone. Best in the county. Come and get 'em.**

Now, whoever opened my envelope, with that ad clearly written in real beautiful cursive, if I do say so myself, must've thought I made a mistake. Which I did not. The day the Shout Out! was delivered, I looked for my ad in the "C's" since the classifieds are alphabetical, but I didn't find it, so I scoured until I found it in the "P's," right above Kale's:

**PEACHES & CORN AVAILABLE  
At Johnson Farm. Serve Yourself Stand...**

Etc. etc. Something about the ad below it caught my attention:

**PEACHES AVAILABLE**  
Small, affable, 2 yo, potty-trained Beagle available for a loving forever home.  
Relinquishing truest friend for circumstances beyond control. Serious inquiries only,  
please. Kale Davies (229) 670-2249

The way it was worded told me this was an advanced sort. There was some desperation, which I understand and recognize from fifty paces. But I have to say, I don't know why I responded, and so quickly. But I did. I remember clearly because it was my last phone call, until Miss Saunders. I had Peaches by the end of the week. I'm real grateful for whoever opened that envelope and decided that Corn wasn't a name, but a crop, since it's all turned out as it has.