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The Taste of Summertime and Tears

A Glimpse of Childhood Past

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I opened the last of the strawberry jam today.

This batch was freezer jam, I've always loved the bright, fresh taste of perfectly ripe strawberries in the doldrums winter. It tastes like early summer and the sweet, wonderful newness of warm days and bare feet on soft green grass.

Maybe this jar tastes a bit of childhood as well.



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Photo by [Jonathan Pielmayer](#) on [Unsplash](#)

My son was ten when we picked these strawberries. There's a local pick-your-own farm we've visited since he could walk. It's a bit of a drive, well into the countryside — the place is huge. They have strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, apples and peaches, sweet corn, spring peas, asparagus, pumpkins, even a sunflower field. When he was three or four, they had the sweetest cat who was absolutely in love with my son, probably with everyone's son. He spent more time rubbing its tummy than picking berries.

We picked up our supplies and a sun-kissed teen with a shuttle cart drove us to a tucked-away field at the back of the property. Maybe two dozen others were scattered about the field, mostly moms with littles, my not-so-little towered above them. He proposed this as evidence that he was right, he was too old for strawberry picking with his mom. I countered, "We're not strawberry picking. We're making jam, this is part of making jam." He rolled his eyes a little but admitted that he did want to learn to make jam.



Photo by [Mick Haupt](#) on [Unsplash](#)

We got to work, joking and teasing as we picked. I always liked to go in the morning before the heat, but we were already sweaty and dirty. For about a week the weather had been hot for early June.

Like popcorn, we strawberry pickers started popping up, noticing a coolness in the air, a light breeze, and the pressure dropping. It was a minute or two more before the thunderhead came into view. The consensus seemed to be that we weren't expecting rain this morning.

The shuttle appeared, no doubt there was a team of teens scrambling around the farm battening hatches and collecting pickers. We held back, my son and I agreed the mamas with littles should go first.

We and two grandmas we had met watched the clouds rumbling in, they moved so fast. The sky was dark before the next shuttle came and left.

Everyone jumped, startled, ducking our heads in a fruitless reflex to brace against the crack of lightning — one thousand one, one thous... — and thunder, ooo it was close. The wind was strong by this point, carrying the smell of cold, impending rain and ozone — I wonder if that's what a storm cloud smells like from inside...

Maybe twelve of us remained, still too many for a shuttle trip.

The lot of us took no more than twenty steps along the gravel drive when the rain came. It came all at once as though it had been suddenly turned on overhead. It was heavy. Each drop was heavy, holding as much water as a drop can hold, dragging the next drop down with it as it fell.



Photo by [Chandler Cruttenden](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The teen arrived again, this time with a friend. They managed to load the rest of the littles and our berries and hurried off toward shelter. The friend walked with us to lead the way, there wasn't much more to do about it as it came so quickly.

The wind calmed and the harshness wore off the downpour, it felt cool and refreshing, and there was no sense fretting over a little water now that the lightning was making some distance. We joked and laughed the whole walk back. My son carried a folding stool for one of his new grandmas and told them everything he knew about making strawberry jam. In return, they filled his head with visions of cakes and creams to put his jam on.

The rain was all but finished by the time we arrived back at the general store. My son regaled the littles with his heroic new stories of the storm he had just braved, they squealed and danced around, acting out the crashing and booming of thunder and lightning. The car seats were soaking wet by the time we got home with our berries.

He'll be 15 by the next strawberry picking season, and I'm increasingly aware that he's growing up. I've been noticing more lately how capable and independent he's become — and tall.

That was the last time we made strawberry jam or went strawberry picking — I imagine our strawberry-picking days are past.

I think maybe this last jar tastes quite like tears.
