

# *The Cantaloupe from Peoria*

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In 1941, an Oxford policeman, while pruning his roses, scratched his face on a thorn. Ignoring the slight cut, it grew infected, spread, taking his eye and bringing him close to death. The doctor had only a trace of penicillin, because it was still difficult to produce. The sample saved the poor gardener till it ran out, and, like the dead roses, he became mulch.

As World War II unfolded, the Brits stopped producing penicillin, so the quest moved to Peoria, Illinois. Secret soil and mold samples poured-in from around the world to help, but to no avail. Till Mary Hunt bought a cantaloupe one morning from a local grocer, shared it with her lab colleagues, having first saved the “pretty golden mold” from its skin for study. It became the most potent penicillin ever, all of it descended from the single random cantaloupe Mary bought from the now anonymous grocer. Saving multitudes. Including my daughter after her appendix burst when young, lying in our bed upstairs while I gave a poetry reading downstairs thinking she only had a tummy ache. A thorn, a cantaloupe, a daughter—the miracle a detail makes.