

PEACH

Margaret Baldwin

Peach

Stage is bare except for a single chair, center stage that has a peach resting on the seat. For the preset, the chair is lit, the rest of the stage is dark. At the foot of the chair, center, is a small black knife, with the blade pointed up-stage barely extending into the area below the chair seat. Lights fade to black. Pause. Lights rise as a young woman enters behind the chair and crosses to it, eyeing the peach. She is barefoot and dressed in a short, orange prom-style dress: tight bodice, flared skirt. When she reaches the chair she begins to speak.

My daddy, he won't eat the skins. He says it's the texture. He doesn't like how the fuzz grabs onto the roof of his mouth. He says it's the taste. Too bitter. Reminds him of dirt.

She takes the peach in her hand.

So I peel his peaches for him into a bowl, make an orange-yellow bed for his vanilla bean ice cream. I throw away the stone and eat the skins. I don't mind the taste of dirt.

She smells the peach, and drifts for a moment in a memory. She begins singing the following rhyme, softly at first, and becoming louder and more playful with the words as she balances the peach on her head and walks back and forth as on a tightrope, in front of the chair.

My nose itches I smell peaches somebody's coming with a hole in their britches.
My nose itches I smell peaches somebody's coming with a hole in their britches.
My nose itches I smell peaches somebody's coming with a hole in their britches.
My nose itches I smell peaches somebody's coming with a hole. . . .

She turns and the peach drops to the floor. She crouches and reaches for it, smelling it again.

Bubba wants me to go all the way. He wants us to do it tonight after the spring dance. He's gonna buy me a wrist corsage. And he's got his brother's ID to get us some champagne and his daddy said he could take the Pontiac. We've never done it before. Everybody else has done it. Even Mary Alice Crabtree's done it and she said she'd never do it 'til she was married and had a big house with a swimming pool in the back yard. But she did it. Last Thursday after soccer practice in the back seat of her boyfriend Darryl's Chevy Nova. She showed me her underwear.

She rolls the peach across the floor.

Bubba and me, we almost did one night watching TV in his basement room while his parents were out at the Pizza Hut. We were kissing and stuff and getting all hot and he got ready to stick it in but I got scared. I said, Bubba, what if God gets mad at us for doing it? Bubba said he didn't see how God was gonna mind. He said He hasn't gotten mad at us yet and we've done near everything but. I said, well how do you know He's not mad at us. How can you tell? Bubba said we'd for sure know if God was mad at us. We'd feel His fire. I said, well where would it come from? What would it feel like? But right then you could hear the Pontiac drive up in the driveway, so we put our clothes back on and went upstairs and his mom fixed us some kool-aid and we ate their leftover slices of pepperoni. They always get the thin crust kind.

She crosses to a "mirror" down-left and begins the motion curling her hair with a curling iron, followed by various preening gestures. [NOTE: all preening gestures are slightly abstracted, to emphasize their ritual as opposed to literal aspects. The objects, such as mirror, curling iron, panty hose and shoes are also suggested by the performer.]

Bubba says we should do it at the peach. That's our place. That's my favorite place in all the whole world. It's not a real peach. It's a water tower shaped like a peach. You've probably seen it from the highway. Everybody's seen it from the highway. People pass by it they say, "There it is! There's the Peach!" It's real famous. You can't get right up under it, they've got a fence blocking it off so people don't climb up and kill themselves or put germs in the water or do something stupid. So Bubba and me, we bring his daddy's sleeping bag, the one he got in the army, and we lie there on the dirt road by the fence. I like it best at night when they've got the peach lit up like some kind of mirage or fancy statue. You can hear the trucks screaming by all night long, and the big ones, they make the ground tremble. When we're lying there and Bubba's kissing on me, I see the Peach all yellow-orange and bright behind his head and it's like he's some saint on a stained glass window, except his face is all dark. He looks real good like that.

She crosses to the chair and makes the motion of putting on panty hose.

They made that peach so perfect you'd swear it was real. They even tilted it on its side so the tip points out. And they put a leaf on it and they painted it and it's got the crack and everything. It's the biggest, juiciest thing you've ever seen in your whole life. Big and juicy enough to feed God himself when He gets hungry. And He does you know. He gets hungrier than all of us. Why else would He make the world, and why would He make us in His image and tempt us and make us hungry if He weren't Himself that way?

She crosses down right and puts on her shoes.

I asked God if He'd mind us doing it. He didn't answer. He never does. But I know He hears me. He hears everything I say and think even when I don't know I'm thinking it. And He sees me. I know 'cause I feel His eyes on me.

She surveys herself in the mirror.

And sometimes they're warm like sunshine filling skin cracks. But sometimes they're cold and sharp like needles, like peoples' eyes get when they look at you and see dirt. And you can't tell if the dirt was already there, or if their eyes made it there. You can scrub and scrub and not come clean 'cause it's inside dirt. Way deep where you can't reach it.

She sits in the chair.

I don't see God, His face I mean. But sometimes, if I close my eyes, I see His hands, and they look just like my daddy's hands only wider and more Almighty. They've got to be, 'cause He's so busy making things. Making people and oceans and deserts and fruits and trees and animals and ice cream 'cause that's His job. Not answers. He makes us make those ourselves.

Sometimes Bubba gets mad at me for not doing it. He says it's been a year almost. He says everybody else is doing it. He says what's the difference between doing everything but and doing it? I don't know what the difference is. I don't know 'cause I've never done it. But I know there's got to be a difference. I know there is. I know when I do it, I'm gonna feel different. I know I am.

She fondles the knife handle with her toe.

It's not like I don't want to do it. I do.

She kicks the knife over to the peach.

Even if hurts I do.

Mary Alice said it hurts bad. We went to the mall the day after she did it, and she couldn't hardly walk five steps without having to sit down on one of those benches with the plants where the old people sit. I asked her if she liked it. She said she couldn't tell if she liked it or not, it was over so fast. I asked if she felt

different. She said she felt different and not different. I asked if she felt full. She didn't know what I meant. She said she felt hungry after, like she could eat a whole pie.

She bites her fingernail.

The peach was the first place Bubba ever slipped me the tongue. It scared me. I didn't know what it was at first. I had my eyes closed. And that tongue popped in my mouth and wiggled around like some earthworm trying to dig itself back under. I got used to it after a while. Now I kinda like it. I like how his tongue grabs onto the roof of my mouth and I like how when I'm breathing out and he's breathing in it's like I'm breathing his breath and he's breathing mine.

That's where he first went up my shirt, made my nipples hard. Later on down my pants, feeling me with his fingers, digging for my spot. He's come pretty close a coupla times I think. First time he put his thing in my mouth, that was weird. It tasted salty. And it was kinda like his tongue only harder and longer. It didn't wiggle so much. Not at first anyways. But by then I wasn't scared 'cause I knew what was coming. That was salty too.

She crosses left, and surveys herself in the mirror again.

It's not like I don't want him inside me. I do, I mean most of me does. Part of me thinks, if I let him inside, maybe he'll fill me up, all of me, even the deep down places, the dark and empty ones. But . . .but what if he comes in . . .and he doesn't fill me? What if the dark places swallow us up, me and him both. Then what?

The night after the pizza night, we went to the Peach and that was the first time Bubba ever ate me. I didn't feel dirty like I thought I would. I didn't even close my eyes. I just stared up at the Peach the whole time he was down there . . .doing what he was doing. I liked feeling his teeth on me.

She crosses to the peach and picks it up.

It hurt, but it was the good kind of hurt, like when you got a mosquito bite that wants scratching and you scratch it. That kind. And I got this feeling. Like a rope pulling me somewhere from deep inside, pulling me from down there up into the sky. And the rope pulled me higher and higher and higher when I got up to the Highest, my insides let go, and I started to laugh, and my legs started to quiver and Bubba reached up and kissed me and I could taste my juice in his mouth. I liked that.

It tasted different than it does on my fingers when I touch myself.

She picks up the knife.

And I didn't worry so much about God's eyes on me like I do when I'm alone and I'm touching me. . . .then it's like God and everybody I've ever known who's ever died is up there watching me doing what I'm doing. There's my

granddaddy with his cigar and Pepper my dog that got run over by the garbage man, and Mrs. Gernigan, the lady down the street who used to baby-sit for us sometimes. There's other people too, and they're all up there sitting in a row, watching me, with their needle eyes. So I do this thing.

She returns to the chair and sits, peach and knife in hand.

I do this thing where I pretend like if turn out the lights and close my eyes, maybe their eyes won't see me down there doing what I'm doing.

But I know God sees me. But I don't think He minds. I mean, they say he minds, but they also say he loves us no matter what we do, and they say His love is inestimable. That means it's bigger than any ocean or desert. . .or any sun in any sky. And I've been thinking. . .ever since the night when Bubba made my legs quiver, I been thinking on what he said about God's fire. And I think I know where it comes from. I think it comes out His eyes. And I've felt it, I think, burning me between my legs. That's the feeling when the rope's pulling me to the Highest. 'Cause that's where God is, in the Highest. That's where He gives you His fire. And it burns you and cools you and makes you laugh and want to cry and makes your legs start to quiver. And maybe it's not so terrible. Maybe it's the kind of fire that makes you clean, like Glory. Inside. That's God's fire.

She cuts into the skin of the peach, and slices away a bit of peel.

And maybe He doesn't mind us doing it. Not any of it. Maybe it helps Him forget about being hungry for a while. 'Cause He's always hungry. That's why He keeps making the world and making us in his image and why we keep making love and babies and stuff. 'Cause we're all hungry. And we're supposed to be hungry. Not just for the fruit and the vegetables and the ice cream, but also for the skins and the dirt and juice and the stone. God makes us hungry for all that, 'cause He's hungry for all that. That's why He made us.

*She continues peeling the peach for some time in silence, allowing the juice to drip and the pieces of peel to fall into her lap. **Extremely slow** fade to black.*

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