

Peaches

by Lynne Viti

We were pretty good girls, never in trouble for anything more than a halfhearted job washing the dinner dishes or taking out the trash cans for the weekly pickup. It was late August, and Sue, Maria and I were about to start our junior year at Seton. I had passed my driver's test in June. Sue could drive, but on this particular night, her parents had revoked her driving privileges for two more weeks for some minor infraction. Her father had been a military man, and he liked to run his family like the Army. School started in a week, and I was determined to make the most of the summer's end. I left my family's station wagon parked in front of Sue's house on Northwood Drive, wedging it between a couple of her neighbor's cars. Sue grabbed her house key and called down to her mother who was ironing in the basement, "Back later, Ma." We walked out the kitchen door, past the trash cans at the end of the cement walk, out the gate and down the alley to Maria's.

Mrs. Selig opened the door. Graying, stern and hard of hearing, she never wore makeup. She always made me feel a little on edge, as if my manners weren't good enough for her. On this particular evening she wore an apron spattered with shards of red and yellow fruit, sweet and fragrant. For a change, Mrs. Selig smiled a little, poking her head into the living room where we stood looking for Maria. "Girls, I hope you like peaches. Come in—we're just getting ready for freezing them."

Peaches lay everywhere. Small, ripe, fragrant red-flecked golden fruit was piled up on the counter and table, in plastic containers and china bowls, on the floor in a bushel basket. Maria had pulled her hair back into a ponytail and pinned it under so it looked like some kind of French hairdo, only half done up. For a few minutes Sue and I just stood there and watched her slice peaches and press them neatly into a square plastic container. A long flat peach cake still in its baking pan cooled on a rack on the Formica table, next to bowls of peaches. Mrs. Selig peeled fruit after fruit. After she skinned each one, she wiped her hands on her apron.

"I'll finish up," Maria said to her mother. She flashed me a look. "Meg and Sue can help."

Maria's mother took off her apron and folded it carefully over the back of a chair. She rinsed her hands under the faucet and said, "Just be sure you wipe off all those counters, hon, so I don't feel anything sticky when I come in to pack your father's lunch for tomorrow." She strode off towards the living room and we heard her switch on the TV.

"Did you bring the money?" Maria asked me.

"Right here," I said. I patted the front pocket of my shorts.

"How much?"

"Fifty," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out two twenties and a ten, and laying them on the table next to the peach cake. "Enough for all of us and more."

"More is good," said Sue. "We can always sell what we don't want."

“You want to walk down there, or what?” Maria asked.

“Let’s drive,” Sue said.

“No way—” I was so paranoid. “If anything ever happened to my dad’s car—that neighborhood—”

“So what are we gonna do, take the damn bus?” Sue asked. It was pretty obvious how stupid that idea was.

“Very funny, Miss Maria,” I said.

“Let’s call Bill Nash and make him take us,” said Maria.

“Right. Mr. College Boy is gonna drive us down to Thirty-Third Street,” I snorted. “Like in what, his mother’s Dodge Dart with the push buttons?”

“Who cares if his car is queer? He’s cute,” Maria insisted. “Let’s call him.”

“Let’s walk,” said Sue, “Bill’s so boring.”

“You just hate him because he never asked you out, Sue,” I said. “Not that your mom would let you go out with a guy in a car yet.” He’d never asked me out either, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me from giving Sue a hard time. She gave me a pissed off look, but she didn’t say anything, because she knew I was right.

“Why don’t we get your car, you drive us, you drop Maria and me off at Thirty-third Street and you wait in the car for us?” Sue looked at me. “No big deal, Meggy. It would take about ten minutes.”

I hesitated. It was only seven, and it would be light for a while yet. Where we were headed wasn’t such a great neighborhood, especially after dark, but we had plenty of time to get down there and back. And the last thing in the world I wanted to do was call Bill Nash for a ride anywhere. It wasn’t that I didn’t like him. On the contrary, I’d had a thing for him since the beginning of tenth grade, when I saw him in a Calvert Hall play. He was the guy constantly stumbling in drunk and falling down in “You Can’t Take It With You.” The play was stupid and I didn’t remember a thing about it except this tall boy with rosy cheeks and a shock of brown hair, crashing to the floor and evoking waves of laughter from the girls. Now he was in college, and I wondered if he had a girlfriend. Probably some older girl. There was no way he’d be interested in a high school junior.

“We going or not?” Sue asked. “I need a smoke. Now.” Maria’s parents didn’t allow smoking in the house—at least not for us. It was fine for the parents to smoke, of course. “Let’s get out of here,” Sue whined.

“Fine. I’ll drive,” I said. The fan in Maria’s kitchen was humming loudly. It would be good to have some fun for a change. The whole summer had been nothing but boring—cashiering at the market, mowing the lawn, driving around at night with my girlfriends wishing we had someplace to go—a party, maybe to D.C. where it was legal to drink if you were eighteen, maybe get to hang out with some older guys. But all we’d had so far was the movies and if we were lucky, someone with a house on the shore invited us down overnight. Once Wanda Barber had us down to a cookout at her family’s summer place on the Severn, but we only put up with her because at school she kept trying to sit with us at our lunch table. Eventually, we just caved in and Wanda started thinking she was one of us. Needless to say, she wasn’t.

“I have to ask if I can go out tonight,” Maria said. She crossed her fingers and held them up. Sue tapped her foot loudly and sighed as Maria wiped her hands, threw the towel down onto the kitchen table, and walked into the living room.

“Let’s wait on the back steps,” Sue said. “I bet her mom says no way.” She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her shorts pocket and shook one out. “You want one?” She opened the door for me very quietly and we sat down on the concrete stoop.

“Sure,” I said. I wasn’t a regular smoker, but sometimes it just felt right to have one. Sue pulled out a silver lighter, lit my cigarette and then hers. She inhaled and started blowing smoke rings. Fully aware that I’d not yet mastered that skill, I took a long menthol drag and just blew it out slowly.

“Nice lighter,” I said. “Where’s it from?”

“I copped it from my sister,” Sue said. Her sister was in college. She had a summer job waitressing in Ocean City and had left most of her good stuff at home in the room they shared. “I have to put it back before she gets home next week.”

“Don’t lose it or she’ll kill you,” I said. Catherine was a notorious bitch, very particular about her possessions, especially the expensive gifts she got from boyfriends, of which she had many.

“Fat chance,” Sue answered. “I have the goods on her—she and her friends had a keg party when my parents went away that weekend and I helped her clean up after—so now I can use all her stuff and she can’t stop me.”

Just then, Maria practically ran out her back door. She grabbed each of us by the wrist and pulled us down the narrow concrete walk through the back gate. Letting go of us for a moment, she swung the metal gate back hard behind her to close it tight. “She is so damned annoying,” she said, looking back over her shoulder. She’d unpinned her hair and it was loose now, down past her shoulders. Her tanned face was still wet from when she’d just splashed water on it. “Get a move on, you two,” she laughed, and she bumped her hip lightly, first against me, then against Sue. “I made parole, but the Queen says I have to be home by ten-thirty.”

“Poor kid,” I said. “My curfew’s midnight.”

We started singing together as we walked three abreast down the alley: “Nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide. Got nowhere to run, baby . . . I know you’re no good for me . . .” The singing ended abruptly as we dissolved into laughter, about, it seemed, nothing. Perspiration ran down my face and I could feel it drip right down into the front of my sleeveless top. My hair, which I had worked so hard at straightening that afternoon, was frizzing. I pulled it back as flat as I could under my headband, trying to look as cool as I thought Maria did.

We cut through the end of the alleyway and onto Northwood Drive. As we walked, we saw kids everywhere, it seemed—little kids out with empty mayonnaise jars, holes poked into the metal tops. They were running over front lawns, squealing and catching lightning bugs. On the corner, girls and boys were lining up at the curb by the white Good Humor truck. The ice cream man, a short, dark guy dressed in whites with a change-maker at his

belt, was pulling popsicles and rockets from the freezer of the truck. I watched the dry ice curl up and escape the open compartment at the back of the truck.

“Want a popsicle?” Sue said. “I might.”

“We have to go,” I said. “The guy told me he’d only be there till eight, and he might not even stay that late.”

“The guy” was someone called Steve. A girl who lived down my block, Dodie Kozak, had told me about him. I used to ride bikes and play hopscotch with Dodie when we were back in grade school, but now she went to the Vo-Tech and ran with a tougher crowd. At the bus stop, though, we would talk about boys, and makeup. She was going to be a beautician, and she always carried this weird shiny plastic case with all her supplies like curlers, end papers for perms, special equipment that hairdressers used. For several weeks while we waited for the bus, we talked about where it was easy to buy beer, how to get fake i.d.s, and where to find some diet pills and grass. She knew a lot about all this, and I knew almost nothing, but I figured I could get some good leads from her. One day she wrote down Steve’s phone number down for me on a scrap of paper torn from the top of a magazine—just his first name and a number. Then she gave me some advice. “This is where you want to go for your grass, you know, maryjane,” she whispered to me one afternoon as we both sat waiting for the bus to take us to work. “Down near the Waverly Theatre is where he hangs out. He’s not a sleaze, he won’t rat you out, and he’s nice. And sort of cute, for an older guy,” she had added. Her express bus had pulled up just then as she handed me the piece of paper, filled with her fat round handwriting, all the i’s dotted with circles. She stepped up to the token box, dropped in her fifteen cents, and looked back at me over her shoulder for a split second. Almost scaggy-looking, I had thought—she had really light teased blond hair, white lipstick, and too much black eyeliner. But on her, it looked almost cool. She was tall and thin and knew how to carry it off. She knew that everyone else knew it, too.

“Hey, daydreamer, I have dibs on the death seat,” Sue said. She opened the passenger door of my car and climbed in.

“Fine with me, age before beauty.” Maria slid into the back seat. “Thirty-third and Greenmount, driver,” she said, giggling.

“Are you sure we want to do this?” I asked.

“Are you turning chicken on us?” Sue said.

“No way,” I said, as I turned the key and pulled out onto the street. Sue switched on the radio and started fooling with the dial.

The street was quiet when we arrived on the block where Steve had said to meet him. I had called him from a payphone earlier that day. “Bring cash, fifty bucks minimum,” he said when I phoned him. “You have to take my word for it, you don’t get to try the stuff out first,” he’d told me. “And if anyone asks, you don’t know me.”

“See if you can see number 505,” I asked. Sue rolled down her window and peered out.

“This is the six hundred block, so one more block west. Are you getting a little weirded out? Don’t, Meg.”

I maneuvered the station wagon into a parking place, not a legal one though, near a fire hydrant. “Should we get out and wait for this guy, or stay in the car?” Maria asked.

“Maria, don’t be stupid, we stay here. This part of town isn’t the best place to be, even if it’s still daylight,” Sue said.

“Looks fine to me,” retorted Maria.

“You are so damned naïve,” I said. “Stay here, you two. Let me just get out and check if this guy’s around.”

Just then the front door of one of the houses flipped open fast, and out walked a guy, older than us but not as old as our parents. I’d say he was maybe thirty. He had on jeans and a dark blue pocket t- shirt, with a pack of cigarettes in the pocket. Winstons, I think, or Marlboros, a red and white package.

“Hey. You Meg?” he called down to me from the doorway. He had short dirty-blond hair and blue eyes, and very strange little teeth.

“That’s me.”

“You girls want to come in for a sec?” he asked.

I turned to Sue and Maria. Maria had almost a frozen expression on her face, but was giving me a look as if to say, No way.

“Well,” I hesitated.

“Girls, come on up. I need a few minutes to get it all together for you is all.”

He seemed sincere enough, but I didn’t know if we should go in. I ticked off the pluses and minuses: bad neighborhood; a guy we didn’t really know; no information about who was in the apartment with him. Plus we were obviously about to engage in a criminal activity – buying drugs. “No, thanks,” I said, smiling weakly. “We’ll just wait here.”

“Have it your way, babe,” he said, and disappeared into the apartment.

“Hey, Meg, I’m gonna go buy some beer,” Sue said.

“Yeah, right,” I said. “At your age, sure. Good luck.”

“No, really,” Sue was annoyed. She waved a card she had pulled out of her back pocket, a Delaware driver’s license. “I have I.D.”

This was something new. “From where?”

“Get out,” said Maria. “What does it say?”

“Mary Ellen Steele, 4015 Walnut Avenue, Wilmington,” Sue read. “One of my sister’s many fakes.”

“Sue, we don’t need beer,” Maria said. “What we came for is better. Anyway, we don’t need them both, that’s for sure.”

“It’s my car,” I said. “Wait right here.”

“Hey! Get up here, Meg!” The guy was back at the screen door of his place, calling down to me sort of softly, so I could barely hear what he was saying. “You coming up to do this or not? Who else is coming with you?” He smiled. I noticed for the first time that he had a green tattoo, maybe a gargoyle, on his forearm. His jeans were tight and dirty, with thin lines of grime running horizontally across his thighs.

I glanced over at Sue and Maria. “Who’s coming?” Neither of them said a thing. Sue jerked her chin up and over towards the porch where Steve was standing.

“I am,” I said loud enough for him to hear me. “Lock all the doors,” I told Sue. “Get in the driver’s seat, keep the keys in the ignition, be ready.” She got out of the car on the curb

side, locked the door, then walked around to the driver's side and slid in behind the wheel. She leaned over and rolled down the front passenger window, and I tossed in the keys. "Be right back," I said. My shorts felt like they were riding up, so I tugged them down as inconspicuously as I could. I adjusted my hair again under my headband, pulling it back tight from my forehead.

I walked fast up the steps to the porch, and stopped a couple of feet away from the front door. Steve had just lit a cigarette, and taking a long drag on it, he said quietly, "How much money you bring?"

"Fifty," I said.

"Lemme see it," he said in a low voice.

"Where's the stuff?" I asked.

"Don't you worry about that, lemme see the money," he replied. He started to move towards me a bit, letting the screen door smack shut behind him. From the inside of the house I could hear a radio playing music, country music.

"Okay." I started to reach into my pocket. "Wait a second, Steve—" "I started to say.

"I ain't Steve," the man said quietly. "Now come here and give me the money."

My heart began to beat faster now. "You're not Steve?" I said. "Who are you, then?"

"Just give me the money," he said. "And get the hell out of here. Now."

My hand stayed in my pocket, and I froze. He reached over and grabbed my elbow with one hand, squeezing it hard, while the other hand seemed to go into his back pocket. My heart started beating faster, the noise rising in my throat, then in my head.

I jerked my elbow away, and surprisingly, he was so unsteady on his feet that I easily moved backwards a few steps and started for the stairs, while he stood there, a bit dazed. "Get up here!" he said in a flat voice, as I felt my foot touch the top step and I tried to propel myself down. "I got what you came for." He started down the steps after me. I nearly tripped across the sidewalk. I pounded on the passenger door window until Sue leaned over and pulled up the door lock. "Drive!" I screamed, as I got into the car. "Drive! He's coming! Drive, you idiot!"

Without a word, Sue started up the car and pulled out onto the street, tires squealing. We rode in silence—no radio, no talking, my heart still pounding. I wound down the window halfway and heard that strange whooshing sound as we quickly rode past parked cars, one after another.

"You okay, Meg?" said Maria quietly, from the back seat.

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "No, actually, I'm not."

"What happened, he try something?" Sue asked.

"I don't know. It was strange. He didn't seem to have the stuff. God, he was so disgusting—"

"You should be more—we should be more careful," Maria said. "If my mother knew I was down here—"

"Let's leave your mother out of this," I said.

Maria lit a Newport, took a drag, and handed it to me. "Here, you need this," she said.

“Thanks,” I sucked in the menthol smoke and exhaled slowly. “Maybe Dodie Kozak set the whole thing up, that scag.”

“You really think she might have?” said Sue. “You’re okay, aren’t you? That guy was a jerk. How old you think he was, Meggy?”

“Old. Maybe thirty?”

We began to giggle and then we couldn’t stop. “Turn on the radio,” I said, when we finally got quiet. “Let’s go back to someone’s house and just watch television.” Neither of them said a word. We drove on, past Memorial Stadium and onto the boulevard heading north.

When we were a few blocks away from Sue’s, she said, “I’d better pull over and let you take the wheel. My father will ground me for another month if he catches me driving.”

“Want to drive by Bill Nash’s house?” Maria asked. “His mother works nights.”

“What was that guy trying to do, anyway?” Sue asked.

“I don’t know, take our money, I guess,” I said morosely. “Maybe something worse. Forget it, Sue. I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s go by Bill’s.”

Sue parked the car as near to Bill’s house as she could, considering the cars were bumper to bumper all along the block. We rang the doorbell. Bill appeared, tall and smiling. He wore cut-off jeans and a sleeveless t-shirt from his old high school. “Ladies,” he said, as though he’d expected us, “Come in. Nothing like company on a hot and humid August night in the city. *Mi casa es su casa*, as they say. Please, join me.”

He led us through his house, empty of adults and siblings, out to the back stoop. We sat there for a couple hours drinking beer, smoking Marlboros and listening to the top forty hits on the radio, which Bill had set in the kitchen window facing out towards the back yard. Sue and Maria sat on the lowest step, swigging from cans of Budweiser and looking up at the darkening sky. Clutching their jars of lightning bugs, the last of the neighborhood children were called in when the street lights came on. Bill and I started to sing along to the radio, and he slipped his arm around my shoulders. Then the stars came out, and the cicadas began their rising song.

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