

Peach

by Katrina Gray

Lana moved books around on the shelf, noticing how dusty they were, and berated herself for not taking better care of them. She felt, especially after Peter's last treatment of her, that she felt too much, and she ticked that point off as one more thing wrong with her. She cried, silently, but could not stop Peter from seeing her body shrug every few seconds, the quaking of her back as the tears came.

Peter was behind her, watching her, his arms crossed. He could not believe she was doing it again. He had worked hard all day, lifting sick bodies, helping elderly limbs get moving again, fingers and arms and necks, and he had to come home to this. He had done nothing, and he felt satisfied with himself when he arrived at this conclusion.

Inside Lana's head was a pendulum, hanging between her eyes, swinging around, coming back as quickly as she thought it was gone. It gained momentum: it not only kept going, but went faster. There was no way to reign it in. Peter's words just hung there, swinging: *You are completely ruled by your emotions. And we both suffer for it.*

"Well?" said Peter. "You wanted honesty. I was honest. Don't act like it's not true."

"But there's a way—" said Lana. She couldn't finish. Her body shook, and she needed to act strong. She gathered herself. "There's a way to tell me." It was hard for Lana to hear that she was causing someone else to suffer. This was something she would think about whenever she doubted herself, to reinforce how she already felt: *You are worthless.* Causing suffering was worse than being neutral or lazy. It was harmful. To hear it out loud was too much.

Peter said what he meant. There was no time for wrapping his words in ribbons. He didn't know how to do that anyway. He was from Chicago, and he learned early how to walk quickly and be efficient.

But Lana was from the South. Alabama. Alabama, where there might have been a lot of talking behind backs, sure, but where even the city people didn't like to say harsh things to someone's face. And if it happened to be necessary, there was some cushioning; there were three sentences to every one that was needed. This disgusted Lana for the years she was a bank teller in Birmingham, but now she saw the advantages. She wished that Peter had spent some time down there, just so he could see there was another way.

“You want me to sugarcoat it?”

Lana couldn't answer for a few seconds. “I don't know,” she said. “I just want you to think of how I might feel.” She had run out of ways to arrange the books. She would have to go to another shelf, or fold the clean towels on the bed, or unload the dishwasher—something to busy herself. But she could not turn around and see him and the look on his face. He was disgusted with her, she knew, but she did not know how to be better. She did not know how to stop feeling.

“Goddammit!” Peter said. “All we do anymore is talk about how you feel!” And he walked away. His hands slapped his thighs.

Lana cried harder, not caring if he heard. She could not be strong. And there was no way for Peter to understand that the thing that had pushed her over the edge was the layering of his quips, the unexpectedness of them, his insensitivity. He knew that she had searched the Internet months for a hobby, a way to express herself. And after receiving an expensive camera and lens in the mail earlier

today, Lana had taught herself how to make the camera work. She felt creative and smart. She took an elegant photograph of peach fuzz, way up close, and she had to change several settings—the light, the focus, the aperture—to get it just right. It looked straight out of a magazine. “Look, Pete!” she said after she kissed him hello. “I took a picture!”

Peter walked into Lana's office. “It's a peach,” he said.

“But you can actually *see the fuzz.*”

He glanced at her computer screen. There was nothing especially striking about the picture. He shook his head. “Sorry,” he said. “I just can't get excited about a picture of a peach.”

Lana couldn't help it: her feelings were hurt. She closed her laptop and got out a book while Peter ate dinner, not asking why she wasn't hungry. Lana did not want to sulk, but it came over her. Her heart hurt, and her stomach wrenched, and her thought was: *When you love someone, you get excited about what excites them.* She would have gotten over that in a little while, even though that thought swung and swung until Peter noticed her there, reading a romance novel, and he said his next thing, the one that really did it.

“I don't understand why you read that shit.”

Lana stopped reading but kept her eyes buried.

“It's not smart,” said Peter.

And Lana's next thought, the one she thought would swallow her, was: *He hates everything about me. I am not interesting to him. I cannot be myself around him.* Her nerves wiggled and twitched. She did not want to say anything that would sound stupid. There was nothing, really, that she *could* say. She closed the book and walked

to the bookshelf and tried to fit it in the wrong place. When that didn't work, she moved the books around—her romances around Peter's philosophy dialogues—but nothing worked. Tears came.

Peter walked over. This again, Lana. This was all she had for him, after all he had done that day, the old people and the lifting and stretching. After being so tired.

There was nowhere else for her to escape to, no way to make him understand. Her feelings mattered, or did they? She had told him: *I'm not saying I'm right; it's just how I feel.* She did not keep it inside. Her therapist said that this was the healthy thing to do, talking these things out. It's how marriages end up working. But for Lana it was easier the other way—brooding and rotting, not letting on. Only dealing with herself and not more Peter. Not having to say things out loud.

And it was easier for Peter too, because he just wanted to wind down and eat some dinner and watch television. He wanted to walk in, take off his scrubs, and not have to look at pictures of peaches.

Hours before this, Lana could not reason throwing herself away. There was a spark in her, something new and brilliant, and she couldn't understand how she could have been so down on herself. The peach had been heavy in her hand, but so soft. She ran her fingers over it a long time before she set it on the windowsill to photograph it. As she set the camera, she remembered her pill. The bottle was too close to the peach and was blurring an edge.

She smelled the peach and thought of how she would cut it open soon, maybe tomorrow. Peter had pulled over to the roadside stand and bought her a bag of them, the first of the season, and this was the best one. He walked through the door with them yesterday, smiling.

She stuffed the peach in a brown paper bag to ripen faster. In her head, Peter said, *You are too impatient*. But the voice wasn't right. Lana had patience. She knew how to wait, and how it felt to wear away little by little, slowly, becoming dark and soft, until even caresses felt like bruises.

