

THE GIRL WHO LOVED HER IMITATION PEACH

“Oh, isn’t it beautiful”! sighed Rosalind, pressing a glorious peach against an equally pretty cheek.

“Too bad it’s not real,” coughed her father, who was, as always, watching TV.
“You can’t eat it.”

“I know it’s an imitation, Dad”, she said, turning her lustrous violet eyes upon him in reproach. “But it’s very, *very* real. You can’t deny that.” She shivered with distaste when she thought of the actual fruit, misshapen and wrinkled in the basket on their breakfast table, as though an elephant had kneeled on it. A surge of idealism flamed within her. “From now on, I vow that I shall not eat any more fruit – not until they look like this!” In defiance of those of an adverse opinion, she held up the splendid imitation and kissed it.

She looked so beautiful at twenty two, with her fine eyes and her thick black curls falling lovingly around her sweet face, no one other than her parents could have resisted her. But her mother was quite able to do so, and she entered the kitchen with a darkening scowl on her brow and anger in her voice.

“For heaven’s sake, not again, Rosalind! I told you that you have to accept the way things are, even if they’re not suitable to your tastes. Now you’re going to deny yourself plain, good luscious fruit! You worry me! What’s going to happen to you, that’s what I’d like to know.”

Rosalind stiffened; a blush rose within her skin, smooth and flawless like the sweetest cream. She knew that her mother was again about to charge her with not having

a boyfriend because none of them was good enough for her. That was a sore point with her: she just didn't find interesting any of the men who had called her, or begged her, or embarrassed her by debasing themselves in numerous appalling ways, or were very old and wanted to keep her. After all, she was young, and there was plenty of time to find the right one. But she didn't want to get into a quarrel with her mother, because she couldn't shout as loud. Glancing at her watch, she uttered a little shriek that she had to go to work, and hastily rushed out of the house just as her mother began her fearful prophecy that she would live alone forever if she waited too long for the right man.

Once outside, Rosalind took a deep breath of a fine June morning. She was in fact not going to work this day at her very remunerative job at one of the most fashionable jewelry emporiums in Washington DC. Her boss must have been unhappy when he got her voice message, but then he was always aggrieved when she didn't come in, because her lovely presence influenced the men to stop dithering and go ahead with their purchase, even if it meant ponying up five or ten thousand dollars. She never felt right about it; it made her uncomfortable to see the guys spend money they didn't have to impress a girl they didn't know. She had ruthlessly searched her conscience and still concluded that she had never suggested anything to lead them on. It was just that they didn't want to appear 'el cheapo' in front of a beautiful woman. But still, just by standing quietly at the counter waiting patiently for the man to make up his mind, she played a role in it and it pained her. One day she'd leave, she knew it, even if the money she made accounted for half of the mortgage on her parents' house.

But today, she felt wonderful! She didn't have to wear the slinky clothes that the boss demanded from her; only a soft rose blouse with sequins and a simple black skirt.

And there would be no bracelet or necklace either, but just some tiny earrings (for she had had to have something). This was to be her day, because she was in search of the artist who had wrought the splendid, flawless peach. Whoever could do something so beautiful was someone she could love, someone who could guide her. And it was going to happen, she knew it, or her slender body wouldn't feel so soft and warm when she thought about it. Of course, she might have searched the internet first, but she was a true romantic, and she would rather not at the outset find that she was hundreds of miles away from her sublime artist. Rather, her first step was to go to the store near her job where she had bought the peach and ask where they had obtained it.

She'd gone there occasionally on her way from work, so there was no problem in finding it. But as soon as she opened the door she knew it was the wrong time. It was still the morning rush – she had forgotten that in her zeal - and the two distraught young men behind the counter were struggling to fill the coffee and food orders to the clamorous people waiting for them. Since she was already there, she took a place in line, and when her turn came she ordered a coffee and asked to speak to the manager about the peach. “About the what?” guffawed the youthful ‘team associate’. “Manager’s not here; back at twelve”, he sneered, and was about to wave her away when his mouth dropped open like a toy that had malfunctioned. He goggled with awe at the sight of her, and anxiously told her to wait until he had more time to get what she needed.

She took her coffee to one of the miniscule chairs near the window and decided to wait – until a few minutes later she noticed that the guy was squinting at her, narrowly appraising her, obviously trying to decide what to do with her. These were alarm bells which experience had taught her, so she quickly rose up and left the place, leaving his

shouted commands “Hey, wait a minute!” falling impotently against the closing door. “He could never be associated with the peach”, she thought scornfully as she walked quickly away, turning the corner so he couldn’t see her from the street if he came looking for her.

She would wait for noon, when the manager came back. In the meantime, she would pass the time by looking in the shop windows as she passed along the street. She had never been there before, and she was surprised by its narrow dimensions, not much more than a rural lane, with modest little shops on both sides of the street. There was so little taking place there that she gave it little attention as she wandered by, when suddenly to her amazement she saw in the window of a quaint little place the peach itself! There could be no doubt; its tremulous glowing blush had no relation whatsoever to the dour family of authentic fruit. It was basking in the very front, encircled by the attendance of various breads and an assortment of teas. Greatly excited, Rosalind instantly went inside the “Tea Corner” to find out more.

No one was present among the fragrances of good coffee and tea, but the muted sound of the door bell soon brought a young girl from behind a curtain to ask Rosalind what she wanted. After hearing Rosalind’s request, the girl smiled pleasantly, went back behind the curtain, from which soon issued a little woman of advanced age, wearing a brown cardigan sweater even though it seemed warm inside. She was carrying a sheaf of papers.

“So you want to know about the peach?” she asked, her grey eyes bright with intelligence behind her rimless glasses.

“Yes”, said Rosalind, “I thought you might know where I could meet the person who created it.”

“It is a creation. A great one! You realized that!” Mrs. Aldyn – that was her name – nodded approvingly, looking at Rosalind with a new respect. “I’ve never known the person,” she continued, “I’m afraid only the delivery boy. But I buy from them frequently. I can give you their address if you like. I have these invoices.”

“Oh, thank you, please!” Rosalind breathed.

“I’m glad you’re going to meet them; I’ve wanted to. But,” she said, putting a cautionary hand over Rosalind’s, “you should know that they may not talk to you when you get there. I tried to call them on the phone, but no one ever answered. All they would do is to give a voice message for the delivery boy’s cell phone.” She shook her head helplessly. “I can’t even be sure they are where they say they are.” Her smile suddenly fell along Rosalind’s shoulders like a mantle. “But I think you’ll do it if anyone can!” She guided Rosalind to a chair, saying cheerfully: “Now let’s look at the map of Adams-Morgan over a cup of tea.”

It was with some trepidation that Rosalind arrived that afternoon in Adams – Morgan, an area of Washington, DC where Rosalind had never had any desire to venture. She had heard of it vaguely as a place of smells and drunken disorder, where there was nothing but bars on every street, where masses of young people terrorized helpless pedestrians such as herself – and all of this occurring under a perpetually deafening noise belched from thousands of electronic instruments absurdly thought of as “music”. But on this day, she found nothing of such a dismaying sort: the streets and people were as pleasantly calm on such a fine spring day as they were at home. This cheered her up as

she waited outside a narrow blank door, waiting to press the buzzer designating the third floor, where she would find “The Celestial Fruit”.

After three tries, someone answered – harshly, but a woman, she thought. “Yes?” Rosalind cleared her throat nervously, gave her name in a whisper, and asked, “Could I talk to the person who made the imitation peach?” A brief silence; then, “Sorry. I’m not here to talk. I have work to do. Goodbye.” But just in time from imminent banishment, Rosalind said: “Oh, please! I just came from Mrs. Aldyn; the “Tea Corner”. There was a silence. Then a window opened and closed so quickly that Rosalind could barely see a head withdraw within. “All right,” buzzed someone. “Come up.”

The door opened; a woman stood there. She was spattered with such remarkable colors that Rosalind couldn’t distinguish her features in the midst of so much dazzle. She stood at the threshold bemused. “I thought you wanted to see me,” chuckled the woman. “But I do,” protested Rosalind. “It’s the...” she gestured at the colorful smock. “Oh, of course!”. “I’ll just take this off.” She quickly pulled the smock over her head. “I’m Serena. What’s your name?” Rosalind was just able to answer.

They could look at each other now. Serena seemed not so beautiful as she was compelling: tall and willowy, a mass of brown hair flowing over her brow and down her shoulders, a large, expressive mouth, and eyes golden, a tiger’s eyes. “Now come in,” smiled Serena, gazing in wonder at the remarkable creature standing before her. She held her hand out to Rosalind, who took it shyly, barely able to look into those eyes of gold. “I saw your peach,” she murmured, “and...and...” her voice failed her, a profound weakness came over her. “You should sit down,” Serena said gently, taking her arm and

bringing her to the couch, sweeping from it the clutter of her present work to allow them both to sit together.

Rosalind thought she would pass out, leaning weakly against Serena's shoulder, but after Serena had held some cognac to her lips, and she had coughed up the fierce liquor, Rosalind felt her strength come rushing again through her body. She was soon telling Serena everything: about her parents, her job and her loneliness. "There is no one," she said, sobbing. "No one."

"Poor baby. But now you have me," Serena said, stroking the wondrous glossy curls.

"Tell me about the peach", murmured Rosalind.

"Later. I'll tell you everything." The phone rang repeatedly, but Serena didn't answer, rapt as she was.

"You have eyes like gold," sighed Rosalind with admiration.

"They melt in your violet ones." They both laughed, comfortably. "Will you go to dinner with me?" Serena asked.

"I'd love to!" Rosalind now felt as frisky as a fawn.

As they left, Serena paused suddenly in the open doorway to look intently at her beautiful friend. She said, "the most important thing to know is that the imitation peach is a beautiful thing, but its ideal is to arouse our desires – to eat the luscious fruit." She squeezed Rosalind's arm.

"I know," Rosalind said, joyously. "I know!"

Now at last, she knew.

END

