

Peaches (and) *Cream*

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By Tanner Lemrick

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... “Peaches and Cream,” by Tanner Lemrick is a wild, stream of consciousness that reminds me of a splash of Kerouac, a hint of Burroughs, the fever dreams of Shelley’s doctor, and a dash of Dostoevsky all pumped into the surrealism of trauma.*

The line of having a trustworthy narrator here is blurred. For example, I’m still not sure if the transaction that takes place, lunch for concert tickets, is as straightforward as what the speaker says or if their mind is covering for the feelings of guilt, shame, and desperation. One of the things that Lemrick does well within this piece is to create that sense of distortion so palpably that the reader begins to lose their sense of place and belonging as the character does:

Singer told me to not assume. She said something about not assuming what I don’t know. Don’t assume what I don’t know—no assuming—unless you want to be an assumer: assumer vs assumed: the assumer assumes an assumption about that which is being assumed while the assumed is being assumed about and assumes nothing is wrong. So, isn’t the assumed the assumer, too? The assumer assumes while—wait: what did I say again? It was—

The rhythm and pace of the speaker’s mind racing over the absurdity of assumption is a way in which they can distract themselves from the situation at hand. As the reader, the jumbled

thoughts create a disconnect between what the character feels and perceives, what the reader feels and perceives, and the true plot of the narrative.

There is some really good work within "Peaches and Cream." The way in which Lemrick creates a tone of uncomfot, danger, the threat of sexuality, misogyny, guilt, and desperation makes this story a powerful commentary on the abuse of power in relation to sex and the trauma that is still inflicted upon countless.

Nice work.

Enjoy.

Five stars

QUALITY QUOTABLES (*for the love of language...*)

The car turns off 16th Ave and makes its way onto the South Expressway, heading downtown. Trees and cars and grass. That's all there is here. Train tracks too I guess. So many trains here actually. They toot and toot and toot despite the no train whistle law, no train whistle mandate. Not supposed to blow 'em in town but they blow the damned things anyway no matter the time of day, rain sleet or snow they always blow.

Water finally warm: feels good. Mmmmmmmmm. Feels warm like the sun. Cleaning dirt off me: making me clean: clean like holy water. Soap. Scrub. Hands in water again. ABCDEFGHI—pain in side again. Ooo. Ow. Hand on side: what is this pain? Oh damn, I got my shirt wet. How to dry—Jesus, just look at me. I didn't even notice there was a mirror here. Gargoyle, that's what I look like. Gargoyle. Hunchback of Notre Dame. My hair looks so brown. Brown. Wish I was blonde.

Peaches and Cream

She sits beside him in the passenger seat of his 1996 Volvo 860. Can't believe I agreed to do this. Agreed. Believe. Comfy seats. Black, fine leather, warm—*pat pat pat*—oh so warm. Sunlight through window feels good. Nice day too, nice day for this: this: going out to eat for a pair of concert tickets.

The radio is playing the newest Grace Vanderwaal song. I wonder what driving with eyes closed is like: can't see anything besides dull sunlight on closed eyelids. That would be hard:

impossible, good thing I'm not driving. I like this song, Mr. Radio. Makes me think. Play it again, please. Singer's voice was soft, raspy, and sexual. Sex is good—scary—never had sex—scared to. Ow, pain in side. Oh, ow, ooo. Hand resting on pain, on side: look over at driver—stranger—he doesn't notice me: grimace: grimace: growing more intense: pain. UTI? Kidney infection? Singer told me to not assume. She said something about not assuming what I don't know. Don't assume what I don't know—no assuming—unless you want to be an assumer: assumer vs assumed: the assumer assumes an assumption about that which is being assumed while the assumed is being assumed about and assumes nothing is wrong. So, isn't the assumed the assumer, too? The assumer assumes while—wait: what did I say again? It was—

Oooo, pain again. He still doesn't know: hands on ten and two: hairy knuckles—monkey hands—gripping wheel correctly: oh how I hate him for being a responsible driver! I just want my damn concert tickets. Why do I have to do this to get them? I should've just bought a pair earlier.

Blinker. *Click Click Click Click Click*: turning. Oh, we're finally here. Wasn't paying attention to road, didn't see the restaurant, too focused on pain in side. He chose this place of all places?: Disgust.

“What do you want to eat, Dillion?” he asks.

“I don't know. I've never eaten here. Only heard things about it.”

“It's so good!” he says, his voice rising and then crashing down. “Do you want me to order for you, Riley?”

She replies, “Riley? My name's Dillion.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. Dillon Dillion Dillion. Like a dill pickle.”

“Yeah.”

“Want me to order for you?” he asks again.

“Sure. Sounds good. Let’s just get to the hotel.”

“Hey, for you to get your tickets, you have to uphold your end of the bargain. You promised to treat this like an actual date, to be nice and act like you’re having a good time.”

Good time. Act peachy: peaches and cream. Today is a good day for peaches and cream, with it being sunny and whatnot. Good day for a desert. I hate peaches and cream. Act sincere.

“I’ll try. I just—you know I’m only here for the tickets. I’m only here because I have to be.”

“I know, Elsa” he says.

“You mean Dillion? Remember, like the pickle?”

“Yeah, Dillion,” he says, thrusting his head forward in revelation. “Like the pickle. But you promised me a date in return for the tickets, and I don’t have to fulfill my end of the bargain if you don’t fulfill yours.”

Happy, try to be happy. Cheerful. Maybe I should turn back; tell him the deal is off. Tell him I don’t give a damn about concert anymore that the concert isn’t worth it if I have to spend even an ounce of time with him. Sun feels good, though. Feels cleansing. God, I hate peaches and cream; floating in a blue bowl of cream; buoyancy, density; peaches not as dense as water; hope floats on the cream in the bowl of life. It’s too late to turn back.

“Hey,” he says to the drive-thru intercom, “Can I get a hot dog?”

Hot dog. Ordering a hot dog, for me? Patronizing—mysagonistic; just give me my damn tickets; too late to turn around, isn’t it? I’ve never had a hot dog. Scared to try one.

“Then, yeah, um, uh...can I also get a, yeah, a double cheeseburger; make that the meal please. Extra mayo, too, please.”

Cheeseburger and hot dog: a dynamic duo, like Pippen and Jordan, like Spongebob and Patrick, Peanut Butter and Jelly, like Michael and Jackson.

“I hate drive-thrus,” he says. “Also, I hope you like hot dogs. I didn’t know what else to get you. I figured everyone likes hot dogs, right?” He shrugs his shoulders as he says this.

Hot dogs from a drive-thru; first for everything—like sex. Dirt and grime; grease stains. The sun is cleaning me, rubbing dirt off me like soap. Feels good. Warm. Like a lover’s touch: sex. Never had it—scared to—like a hot dog.

“Uhhh, I’ve actually never had a hot dog before,” she says, sounding unsure of herself. Why was that so hard to say? Why does me not having a hot dog before matter? So much weight in hot dogs: weight but no density. Not as dense as water: that’s why they float, right?

“You’ve never had a hot dog before?” His mouth hangs open in disbelief. “That’s crazy, Dillion. Everyone’s had hot dogs before.”

Not me never had a hot dog and don’t suppose I want to but I must have a hot dog: hot dog for some tickets, a fair exchange I suppose.

And see!” he says excitedly, pointing a finger gun toward her, “I got your name right! Dillion, just like the pickle.”

Hands me bags of food, place them down on the floor for our drive; I refuse to hold them. Too greasy and dirty. Driving now, going to the motel. Rented it just for this occasion: can’t believe he would do that. Just for this? Just for some crummy food: a stupid hot dog and a stupid cheeseburger with extra mayo and fat and lard and shit and cum and—Ooo, pain in side again. OwOwOwOwOwOwOw, it hurts like hell; like a peach frying in oil; why do fried foods float? All of them float, right? Chicken, yes. Ham, yes. Butter and ice cream: yes and yes. Do fried peaches--! Pain again, grabbing side, grimace.

The car turns off 16th Ave and makes its way onto the South Expressway, heading downtown. Trees and cars and grass. That's all there is here. Train tracks too I guess. So many trains here actually. They toot and toot and toot despite the no train whistle law, no train whistle mandate. Not supposed to blow 'em in town but they blow the damned things anyway no matter the time of day, rain sleet or snow they always blow. Car accident long time ago. How old? With grandparents, definitely. Snowy outside. Couldn't stop, just kept sliding into the car in front of it and *Bam!* Kept driving, that's what we did. Seven years, maybe. Didn't stop to check on them, somebody else prolly did. But what if they thought that, too? Someone else will get them, we all thought. Someone else will get them and use the jaws of life to save them from their steel cages of death.

Southview Bible Church. Watched a Christmas movie at the monthly potluck: December potluck. Food was always so bad, but better than my mom's cooking. Bad guy used the word gay, as in happy, joyous, and overflowing with love of Christ. He had a goatee: black as night, mustache too and sideburns and a purple top hat and a black suit with purple tie to match the hat, but no smile to match the overflowing joy of Christ. The only thing overflowing is—Hot dogs. Would Jesus like hot dogs? Never any hot dogs at the potlucks. Chili. Garlic bread. Cheeseburgers even. But never any hot dogs. Sunday school breakfast pizza. Scavenger hunt among students. I cried because I couldn't remember why Esau sold his birthright. Never forgot since, will never forget now. Sold it all for a meal, a bowl of stew because hungry he was hungry and and, he should've sold it for at least a hot dog, or some peaches and cream, or some of Eva's garlic bread from Southwest Bible Church's monthly potlucks. Made it every month and it hit like hell. Wet. Noah's ark. Grab one of each sex. Male flamingoes and female flamingos and

male elephants and female elephants and male cats and female cats and male hot dogs and female hot dogs.

Pain. Ouch! Close your eyes. Close them, just focus. Focus: focus: focus: focus: focus: focus.

“You ready to get out, Mia?” he asks.

Eyes open: Motel 6. Scummy. Color of a smoker’s lamp. Doors are bright pink. Right next to La Mesa Mexican and just across the street from Red Lobster and Applebee’s. Downtown. How did we get here already? Wait—damnit! He called me Mia. Not Dillion like the pickles. Oh well, been too long. Correct him next time I suppose.

“Yeah,” she says. “Let’s get out and go inside.” She cradles the bag of food like a newborn baby and gets out of the car.

Here we are, the motel of his choosing. Of course, he’d go cheap for our date. I can’t even be miserable in a nice place: no. Instead, I get to be miserable in a motel for cheapos; cheapy cheapos, sleezy sleezos, beezy beezos—wait, isn’t that the Amazon CEO? Beezos.

Ahhhhh. Soft and pillowy: bed is nice. Not hard like I expected: not hard like a rock: Moh’s scale of hardness. Where did I learn that? I hope that hot dog is good, but I know it won’t be. I hope the concert is good, too. Oh, I learned it in middle school science class. Of course, how could you forget, you silly. With Ms. Goodrich: nipples poking through her bra every day; all the boys loved it, talked about Goodrich’s goodies; bloated boobies sagging from gravity. Mine will be like that one day; my goodies will be saggy like cow utters. The boy I liked talked about Goodrich: Evan, his name: his kiss on my kiss: after school he walked me home once and kissed me before I went inside and his wet tongue, so wet, and warm mouth: instant ramen and sriracha, I still taste it. Felt so good but so underwhelming.

She stands up from the bed and walks to the bathroom. Get cleaned up before eating. Before the hot dog and instant ramen: before the peaches and cream split at the seams, and and and and. Running water feels nice. Much too cold still though. Warm up. Warm. Warm, please. Taking too long: water heater here probably sucks: sucks nuts. If I was a guy squirrel and you were a girl squirrel would you eat my nuts? Ha. Funny. Good joke. Heard it in high school: sophomore year, I think. Cole told it to me. Cole told. *Cold.*

Water finally warm: feels good. Mmmmmmmmm. Feels warm like the sun. Cleaning dirt off me: making me clean: clean like holy water. Soap. Scrub. Hands in water again. ABCDEFGHI—pain in side again. Ooo. Ow. Hand on side: what is this pain? Oh damn, I got my shirt wet. How to dry—Jesus, just look at me. I didn't even notice there was a mirror here. Gargoyle, that's what I look like. Gargoyle. Hunchback of Notre Dame. My hair looks so brown. Brown. Wish I was blonde.

“You coming, Sara?” she hears him call from the main room.

“Yeah, be out shortly. Just cleaning up a bit.”

Must hurry. Be out shortly. Knots in stomach, biting butterflies and warm pelvis. Afraid to peaches and cream. Afraid to hot dog. Afraid to sell a birthright for for for, what? I'm actually doing this; too late to leave. Too late: trapped like a—well, like a what? Like a...mole. No, that doesn't make much sense. Like a hot dog in a bun: trapped like peaches in cream. Just trapped. He means no harm. Just lunch, or so he says. That's all he wants and then I get the concert tickets: my tickets. Almost over.

“You almost done?” he calls. “You're taking a long time in there.”

She opens the door and walks back to the bed.

“Sorry it took so long. I looked bad and tried to make myself a little better”

“I think you look beautiful,” he says, lightly brushing her cheek with his hand. “You look like a Georgia peach.”

Smiling: trying to make him feel better so I can get my tickets. Don’t want to eat, but I have to. For my tickets, so I can see that concert.

He picks up the bag, plucks their food from it, and hands her the hot dog.

“Hope you enjoy this, Alexis,” he says warmly.

I’m ready for this; ready for this. I can do it: it’s just a hot dog—just a hot dog—nothing more—nothing less. You can do this you can do this you can do this, yes yes yes. God, I looked ugly earlier, so ugly. Not that I look much better now: I just—

Bite: not instant ramen, but hot dog; pure hot dog. Not bad, better than I expected. Needs condiments, though. Condiments. Condiments. Condoments. Condom mints. This hot dog could use more condom mints. Funny. Don’t eat too fast. Take it slow, very slowly; molasses and honey; flow of lava. Don’t wanna look desperate, do we? Not too eager! No no, not here, not now. Bite: hot dog. Flavorful and soft. Very soft. Almost mushy. Is it true these are made out of the rejected cow giblets? Or is it pig giblets? The rejects. Energy drinks made of bull sperm. Heard that once, too. Bull sperm. Pig orgasms last thirty minutes. Ecstasy and bliss. Thirty minutes of Heaven. Seven minutes in Heaven.

She looks up at him, eyeing him intently. He eats like a horse; no, a cow. A praying mantis shoveling food into its mouth with razor-sharp mandibles. Yep that’s it. Definitely. Praying mantis. He has beady eyes too. Big beady things; bulbous. Light bulbs. By God it sure is dark in here isn’t it. Does he want it like this? I wouldn’t mind a bit more light. It might help to open the curtains.

“How’s lunch?” he asks, taking a bite of his cheeseburger with extra mayo.

She swallows part of her hot dog and says, “Good. It’s better than I expected. Um, you got a little something.” She gestures to her own lips.

He wipes the left side of his lips.

“No. The other side.”

He wipes the other side. “There?”

“Got it,” she says.

“I knew you’d like it,” he says. “Do you mind if I turn on some music for us?”

Music? What does he think is going to happen between us? He told me we were just having lunch. Just a simple lunch. He better not try to make any moves or—

“No. Not at all,” she says. “I would love some music.”

“Any preferences?” he asks, standing up and grabbing his phone.

“Anything rap works for me.” Another bite of hot dog. Damn that’s good. It tastes better the more I eat. Must be an acquired taste. Like coffee, or beer, or vodka. Nobody likes it at first, but it gets better the more you have.

Setting his phone down on the bed between them, he says, “I’m sorry, I forgot my Bluetooth speaker. It’ll have to play through my dinky phone speaker.”

Lil’ Yachty. Melodic, harmonious, easy-going, optimistic. Change of pace. Lil’ Yachty. A boat would be nice. Cool lake breeze. Bright shining sun. Warm. Warm. Warm. Cleaning me of dirt and grime.

“Are we doing anything else?” she asks. “Or is this all we’re doing?”

“This is all, Lisa. Just eating and listening to music.”

“Dillion?”

He takes another large bite of his hamburger and gestures to her in acknowledgement. Almost finished with it. One bite left. Only one left. I only have one left, too. Should I wait for him? Wait to finish? I will. I'll wait like I should and he'll like it too, yes he will like it and I think I would like that too to wait for him and do it together, take the last bite and be over with it together, like friends or lovers or a pair of peach slices floating in a bowl of cream.

He finally swallows. *Gulp*. Moment of truth. Ending: yes, the ending of all. Almost over. Lifting hot dog as he is lifting hamburger, opening mouth—here we are, yes yes yes yes, ending of everything—tickets almost mine, here they are—I can see them now—smell them now: yes, smells of ink and greasy fingers and old dusty receipts and and and and:

Bite: instant ramen and sriracha, i taste it, tastes just like i remembered. feels so good, but still so underwhelming. warmth. so much warmth. wrapped in it like a blanket or a baby in mother's womb.

now gone.

now gone

now just chilly and i feel dirty and i wish the sun was here to clean me and open up the blinds, maybe that would make me warm and clean if a little sun shined in but blinds are closed so pelvis feels cold and pain in side is gone for some reason so all that's left is dirty and cold and dirty and cold and dirty and cold and a feeling similar to sliced peaches in cream and so much shame for selling a birthright for concert tickets and i didnt sell it for a hot dog but concert tickets and i get up and open the blinds and i feel the sun but even that doesnt warm me no no no because there is no warming emptiness and loss and grief and and and

nothing

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The idea for this story was conceived after I read Ulysses by James Joyce. Molly Bloom's soliloquy, particularly the last 100 words or so, resonated heavily with me. During the entire section, however, Molly reminisces on her first meeting with her husband, Leopold Bloom, and worries about his health and thinks of the affair she is having with another man, all while she lies next to her husband in bed. So, I wanted to experiment with these themes myself—love, lust, sex, desire, shame, innocence—and do it like Joyce did, in stream-of-consciousness.*

And, finally, I wrote this piece around a year ago. Originally, I submitted this piece for a creative writing workshop I was in for my undergraduate study, and, well, the peer responses I received on it were scathing. One peer told me they didn't "prefer this story," and that most of the plot was useless because everything that happened could be summed up in "a single sentence." While another said, "there seems to be no purpose to any of the character's thoughts or actions." So, in light of these reviews, I let the piece sit for a year and almost let it die, until a month or so ago when I revisited it.

After rereading Peaches and Cream, I fell in love with it again, and then I edited it, and, well, now, here it is: in front of you.

AUTHOR BIO: My name is Tanner Lemrick and I am an English graduate student at Northwest Missouri State University. I live in Maryville, MO with my wife.