

# Ms. Peach Makes a Run for Coffee

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Ms. Peach hoarsely silenced the alarm. When she forced open her thickly gummed eyelids she saw that sometime during the night the clock-radio had switched to battery power. Belatedly she noticed the white noise scritch in her ears. Another hit on the generator, she conjectured as she searched for a working station.

Dressing, Ms. Peach listened to the news and weather reports broadcast by one of the two stations in the city equipped with backup generators. She knew one had to take anything gleaned from impersonal sources as a probable lie, but found any news preferable to that blank emptiness into which rumor, speculation, and private fantasy of direst catastrophe inevitably crept. And weather predictions, at least, had a reasonable chance of being true.

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Ms. Peach arrived at the Auvergne Preparatory Academy for Young Women sticky and sweaty from the long dirty walk, though not disheveled--- as she observed of two colleagues sharing her elevator. One could not afford to procrastinate ironing one's clothes or washing one's dishes or body, for one never knew when water and power cuts would interfere with the orderly processes of civilized living. Ms. Peach shook her head over the teachers who'd been caught unprepared: Ms. Auvergne would have something sharp to say to them, indubitably; and if there were already notes of past lapses in their files, they'd be looking for work by the end of the week. The teachers must be at least as neatly turned out as the girls, that stood to reason. "You are living examples to the students," Ms. Auvergne reminded them at every staff meeting. "Your appearance and deportment must be exemplary!"

Staring out at the faces in her homeroom class, Ms. Peach swallowed against the lump in her throat; her eyes watered as she thought of the dozens of clean, pressed blouses hanging in these girls' closets. Never did *their* blazers show signs of wear and tear or even the spills normal to adolescent clumsiness. *When Melanie was a teenager she never could wear a blouse two days running. And her school blazer always seemed to be missing a button, which I insisted was her responsibility, not mine. Their mothers of course have unlimited access to water and electricity, and probably maids as well.* Ms. Peach frowned down at the printout of the day's announcements to be read once the signal had been given and the Pledge of Allegiance recited. Would her aging quality suit last another term? She had better start saving the money for a new one. Ms. Auvergne gave no quarter when it came to propriety and appearance. "If *we* do not observe the decencies here, who will?" Ms. Peach had once heard her say to a teary-eyed teacher under ultimatum to replace her shabby threadbare suit.

Who indeed? Ms. Peach wondered as the signal pulsed through the halls and classrooms of the school. Who indeed?

When Ms. Peach entered the Staff Lounge at morning break she found her colleagues in fevered discussion of three choice (if not prime) pieces of news. According to the local NBC affiliate, the Mayor and City Council were at that very moment debating whether or not to request Federal Assistance. Colonel Lewis's faction, of course, opposed doing any such thing, and reportedly persisted in citing what had happened in the city of M\_\_\_\_\_ when FEMA had complied with its mayor's request for assistance. That *their* Mayor, however, increasingly inclined these days towards bringing in the feds posed no mystery for any of the teachers taking morning break in Auvergne's Staff Lounge. "We just about have a military junta running this city instead of the Mayor or the City Council," Ms. Devine stated bluntly, provoking alarmed looks from her colleagues.

Nervous chatter poured into the pool of silence rippling outward from Ms. Devine's solecism, so that Ms. Peach soon learned the second piece of news, an item her colleagues lingered over the way uncouth sorts of individuals worried at torn cuticles. Ms. Auvergne, rumor declared, had terminated Ms. Garfield not half an hour ago. "Someone," Ms. Peach was told when she inquired as to the provenance of the rumor, had gotten the word from Mr. Wastecote, Ms. Auvergne's Chief Assistant. "When the Stanton girl got cheeky with her in First Period P.E., Garfield hauled off and slapped her one," another colleague whispered into Ms. Peach's ear. Ms. Peach tsked-tsked. The Stanton girl had the smartest mouth in the Sophomore class, which called for especially controlled and crafty handling. Ms. Peach sympathized with Garfield; she could easily imagine the poor woman's state of mind, starting the morning with a wrinkled blouse and a sweaty filthy walk, followed by a sharp reprimand and a note in her personnel file, only to have to face the little bitches with their knowing smirks in homeroom... Clearly it had been too much for Ms. Garfield. Still, not every teacher merited a position at Auvergne's...

Five minutes before the end of break the third tidbit of news burst upon the Staff Lounge when one of the new teachers (Ms. Peach could not keep track of all their names, it was enough that one had to remember the names of all the students in the school) dashed through the door and shouted over the din of their mostly female voices, "Coffee! They're selling real coffee beans for B-series currency over in the S\_\_\_\_\_ District!"

Pandemonium ensued. Ms. Peach frantically fought her way through the crowd that had instantly formed around the teacher who had made the announcement. Coffee! She hadn't had real coffee for months. She would pay *anything* for a handful of coffee beans, for of all things the lack of coffee in her life had been the most intolerable. Water and toothpaste shortages paled in comparison with coffee deprivation. She hated the vile, sickeningly tannic black tea she had taken to drinking solely for its caffeine content.

If it didn't prove a baseless rumor and someone actually was selling coffee for B-series currency, somehow, some way she would get hold of it--- even if she had to mortgage her soul to do so.

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Ms. Peach spent most of her lunch break queuing for the use of the telephone. For nearly the entire time the two secretaries directly ahead of her exchanged nauseating details of student gossip about the previous weekend's debutante balls. Ms. Peach soothed her nerves by slowly and rhythmically stroking her soft, worn silk scarf. It was a fact that she had not been able to resist wearing it just about every day since purchasing it a year and a half ago in a quality used clothing store on the fringe of the H\_\_\_\_\_ Park District. The first day Ms. Peach had worn the scarf Ms. Auvergne had flicked it a knowing, cynical look, and her eyebrow had most definitely cocked; but so precious did Ms. Peach rate her find that the Director's merely silent criticism did not touch her.

Ms. Peach watched the clock as she waited, and as the minutes crept by grew anxious. What if Melanie were out of the office? Suppose she had decided to eat her lunch somewhere other than at her (admittedly depressing) desk? The expense of the call would then have been incurred in vain, her own lunch break wasted. Still: she had never since the city had introduced their damned inferior currency heard of coffee being sold outside the Federal Dollar shops. Ms. Peach knew she would never forgive herself if she failed to pursue this golden opportunity.

After twenty minutes of patient waiting, Ms. Peach found herself next up. Without prompting she handed her i.d. strip and currency disk to the security officer and supplied him with Melanie's name and number. The secretary ahead of her finished quickly. The officer pushed Ms. Peach's strip and disk at her and told her to make her call. Ms. Peach slipped the disk into the beep-box; languorously (for what little energy the man had seemed to Ms. Peach to be devoted solely to the unlit cigar such an unsightly soggy mess in his mouth), the officer input Melanie's name and number.

When Melanie answered on the first ring, Ms. Peach breathlessly explained about the coffee, then asked her daughter whether she should pursue the lead after school, and if there were coffee to be had how much of their funds she should allocate to its purchase.

“Of course you have to go for it,” Melanie said, “it would be crazy not to! What a chance!” She sighed. “If only we had some savings, it’s such a perfect investment, can you imagine how much profit we could make if we resold it ourselves?”

Ms. Peach gulped at her daughter’s lack of caution. Normally listeners didn’t bother with people like herself, but rumor had it that some listeners monitored lines on a random basis.

“Let me think, let me think,” Melanie said.

Aware that they had been talking nearly an entire minute, Ms. Peach rushed on, “Of course, if you think we can’t afford it, Melanie, I surely do understand.” Since Melanie made half again as much as she did, spending decisions for elastic consumption must be hers to make. Miserable at her own longing, Ms. Peach feebly continued, “It’s just that of all things, coffee is something I’ve---”

“Look, here’s what we’ll do, Mom,” Melanie said. Ms. Peach flinched at the beep but told herself there was no help for it now. “You buy as much as you can get for what we have in our joint account. Whatever’s on the disk, spend it. And in the meantime I’ll tell my supervisor I’m ready to take up his offer to do a week or two of overtime.”

Overtime! Ms. Peach knew what *that* meant, Melanie had told her often enough about how her pig of a supervisor had been pressuring her. “Melanie!” Ms. Peach said. “Don’t even *consider* it! It *can’t* be worth it!” Sweat broke out on Ms. Peach’s forehead, for even as she said the words she knew that in her treacherous heart of hearts she wanted that coffee so badly that---

But no. She didn’t want it *that* badly. What kind of mother would sacrifice her daughter simply for the pleasure of drinking coffee?

But Melanie brushed aside her concern. “I want you to promise me you’ll do it, Mom,” she said. “Not only will we get coffee for ourselves out of the deal, but it’s a chance for getting our head above water, a chance we may not get again.” Melanie clicked her tongue. “If only it’s not too late by the time you get there. Do you think you could take off from school early? I’d do it myself, but if I’m going to be working something out with Brown then I really can’t afford to be taking the afternoon off.”

“If you’re sure, Melanie,” Ms. Peach said (and cringed at the quaver in her voice).

“I’m sure.” Melanie’s voice didn’t quaver.

“Then we’d better hang up, dear.”

The beep-box squawked about a second after Ms. Peach broke the connection, clocking them in just under two minutes. They’d certainly run *that* call close.

As the introductory bars of The Anthem surged through the halls and classrooms of the school, Ms. Peach rose to her feet and assumed the properly respectful posture due the ritual. All afternoon the drumbeat of anticipation had been quickening and intensifying her need to tear out of the school and across the city in search of coffee. By ninth period her elation had mounted so exponentially that a nonsense verse--- *O Frabjous Day/ Calloo, Callay!/ Coffee! I’ll soon be drinking coffee!*--- took hold of her brain, endlessly repeating itself in merciless iteration, threatening her concentration on the words--- so mechanical and glib!--- pouring out of her mouth and onto the pages of the students’

notebooks. *They'd write anything down, just anything, never noticing any oddity until they came to reread their notebooks the night before the next test.* Something about her difficulty in concentrating reminded her that people used to say coffee was a drug, but Ms. Peach told herself not to be silly. If coffee were a drug then buying and selling it would not be legal, and the Mayor wouldn't be known to consume three cups of cappuccino every day before noon.

``---for amber waves of grain," Ms. Peach and the girls dutifully sang. The girls' eyes slipped sideways, sneaking longing glances out into the corridor (while Ms. Peach held hers rigidly on the flag mounted on the wall beside the open door); their hands fidgeted restlessly, their knees, hips and feet shifted constantly, betraying how unbearable they found this final obligation in the school day (while Ms. Peach's hands furtively writhed behind her back, and her toes wriggled and bent and stretched within the stiff stern confines of leather-simulated vinyl). All the traditional verses plus two of the new: how unbearable, how intolerable, how excruciating Ms. Peach found this afternoon's performance of the daily ritual. Ordinarily it passed indifferently as simply one more moment of prescribed tedium the students disproportionately minded. But today...

The last verse seemed to take as long to get through as all the others combined, but finally it was completed. Hardly able to contain her excitement, Ms. Peach dismissed the class, put off 'til the next day the student who lingered to chat, locked her desk and the classroom and headed for the Staff Lockerroom. *O Frabjous Day/ Calloo, Callay!* the frenetic voice in her head sped her steps through the corridors.

*Coffee, I'll soon be drinking coffee!*

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When Ms. Peach spotted the red plastic tape looped around the lamp post and pulled taut across the intersection, she first assumed that only that particular block had been barricaded off, that a raid was in progress or a manhunt or something of that highly local sort. But as she drew nearer she realized that the red plastic tape, wrapped around every available pole on the opposite side of the street, stretched farther into the murk than her eyes could follow. And when she observed the city police staked at intervals facing her side of the street, she swallowed on a suddenly dry throat and glanced nervously at the impassively boarded buildings around her. Could they have sealed off the entire district? One knew, of course, that such things happened. But wouldn't national guard--- and not city police--- then be staked along the perimeter?

Until this disconcerting point Ms. Peach had strode the streets with reasonable confidence, elation--- *O Frabjous day/ Calloo, Callay!*--- and certainty of success. (To accomplish anything in this godforsaken city one had to *believe* in the success of one's undertaking.) Now as she walked as naturally as she could past the police (separated from her by only a trash-strewn expanse of empty concrete street), anxiety and doubt assailed her. It had been just such a situation in which Dick had been snared--- though on the other side of the tape. But who knew that they wouldn't suddenly decide to shift the Fire Zone a few blocks to the east, thus trapping her willy-nilly inside? Dick had been checking out a rumor of shortwave radios being sold for B-series currency and had gotten caught in the crossfire between national guardsmen and a drug gang. From all that they had pieced together afterwards it seemed likely he hadn't even known the area he was in had been designated a Fire Zone, but had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were always claiming on the radio and TV that if you obeyed the laws and minded your own business you had nothing to fear. And now here she was, on the same kind of errand Dick had been on when he had been...

Absorbed in her thoughts, Ms. Peach nearly cannoned into the cop blocking the sidewalk. ``This is a Fire Zone, lady," he yelled at her. He jerked his thumb backwards at the red plastic tape Ms. Peach belatedly noticed had been slung across the intersection. ``Can't you read? You can't go any further."

Ms. Peach swallowed in an effort to work some saliva into her panic-dried throat. "Uh, could you give me some idea, officer, of how far the barricade extends?" Ms. Peach hated the tremor and unnaturally high pitch she heard coming out of her own mouth. The cop, she knew, must despise her for being so easily intimidated.

The big plastic bubbles set into his face mask imbued his glare with a frightening aura of menace. "That's none of your business, is it." His hand shifted to his holster; he leaned forward. "Or is it?"

Ms. Peach's head wobbled back and forth, back and forth. "I, uh, ah thank you, officer," she stammered as she staggered backwards. After Dick's accident the national guard had claimed he had been a member of the drug gang and had insisted on counting him as a hit for their side. Back then they had needed a high body count to keep from being superseded. And of course because of Captain Burton's adamance in the matter she and Melanie had both been suspended from their jobs until they had managed to prove themselves completely innocent of "knowledge" of Dick's supposed association with thugs. This had been difficult because Dick had once been a card-carrying member of the ACLU. Fortunately, though, the national guard eventually verified that neither Melanie nor herself had ever belonged to such pro-criminal organizations...

Ms. Peach retraced her steps to the previous intersection and headed east for a while--- just to be safe. This detour pushed her further and further out of her way (and now the circle she would have to make--- presuming her destination didn't lay within the Fire Zone--- arced far east and north from where she wanted to go), but as her experience just now running into that cop demonstrated, walking along the perimeter of a Fire Zone was madness. In retrospect, she counted herself lucky that he hadn't taken her for an out-of-town reporter who had somehow slipped past the city's checkpoints, or a member of a drug gang. The police and the guard were there to make the city safe, granted: but Ms. Peach preferred to avoid direct contact with them.

*Could it be I'm paranoid because I have a guilty conscience? I am hoping to buy enough coffee to be able to resell some at a profit. People might do such deals all the time, but it isn't legal.*

Ms. Peach walked three blocks east before resuming her northerly direction. How far, she wondered, should she continue north before trying to go west again?

But the beating throb of helicopter rotors overhead stopped her dead in her tracks. She threw back the hood of her overcape and craned her neck to see. The three craft within her scope of vision flew low enough for Ms. Peach to distinguish the big nozzle attachments loosely dangling from their bellies. Gas, she realized in sudden panic. They were going to gas the Fire Zone! With fingers made clumsy by violent trembling, Ms. Peach drew her hood tightly over her head and snapped the cross-placket into position across the lower half of her face. How fortunate that the air was so bad today that she'd had to wear her breather, for it meant she wouldn't have to worry about asphyxiation. She only hoped that whatever they sprayed wouldn't be hard on her eyes.

*Illustration  
by  
Keith  
Mini  
on  
(1996)*

Precautions in place, Ms. Peach ran to the next intersection and turned east. After only half a block her

side ached and she was gasping for breath. Still Ms. Peach pushed herself--- until she saw the drab olive green vans barreling around the corner, hurtling straight towards her. Her legs shook, her heart raced and pounded in terror at the nightmare image rushing upon her. She threw herself flat against the board-covered windows of the nearest building and watched the vans speed past. Was she now inside a Fire Zone? Should she try to find refuge somewhere in the neighborhood? Surely there must be some business establishments left in the area, it must be that not paying attention she hadn't particularly noticed any of the old storefronts open, she didn't really know this neighborhood, she had just assumed she would be passing (quickly) through, en route to her final destination...

Ms. Peach stood dazed. The smell of cordite drifted around her. The world felt, looked, smelled utterly strange. Her eyes fastened on the boarded-up building opposite, on the **ONE COUNTRY UNDER GOD** and **AMERICA FOR REAL AMERICANS** neatly stenciled over its disorder.

What am I doing here? she wondered after an indeterminate amount of time had passed. For a few appalling moments she couldn't remember where she was or what she had been doing. The distant flapping of helicopters, though, jolted her back to reality. Coffee, she reminded herself. She was hot on the trail of coffee being sold for B-series currency...

Ms. Peach glanced up and down the street. The coffee wasn't worth it. The sane thing to do was to forget about it and concentrate on getting herself home in one piece. Ms. Peach had of course heard stories of people doing rash deeds simply to get their hands on bootleg liquor. Such behavior had always struck her as crazy--- perhaps even psychotic--- rather than heroic (as some people would have it). *She* did not care to lose her life simply for the sake of a few pounds of coffee beans...

*It's not like I'm addicted to it.*

Ms. Peach drew a deep breath and stepped resolutely away from the wall. Determined to escape this section of the city, she struck out in the westerly direction she had been taking before she had paused to rest. As she scuttled along at her top speed she asked herself how she could have been so crazy as to have put herself in danger for the sake of coffee. Of course, she excused herself, it had never occurred to her that getting to the S\_\_\_\_\_ district would be dangerous, and she certainly hadn't known that this part of the city had gone so, well, *deserted*. Most of the street signs had disappeared. Everything looked derelict. But when she'd been through here just six months ago there had still been plenty of life left in the area, and she couldn't now recall anyone having mentioned this neighborhood as one of those that had ``gone." Crossing the intersection of an unmarked side street (whose name she could not remember), Ms. Peach averted her eyes from the sight of abandoned vehicles crammed bumper to bumper over every inch of its pavement. Now *that* sort of thing could happen in any neighborhood, the owners of those cars might very well be living in the upper stories of the buildings on that street...

Finally Ms. Peach reached a thoroughfare teeming with pedestrian traffic, news-sheet vendors and Pepsi kiosks. Her eyes filled with tears; her knees shook. For a few seconds Ms. Peach gasped for breath (in spite of the oxygen feeding directly into her nostrils, in spite of the fact that she had had no trouble breathing back *there*). A part of her longed to grab one of the many people she passed and tell them what a scare she had had coming so close to a Fire Zone. But since most of her knew that doing so would be sheer craziness, Ms. Peach restrained her need for an outburst and kept her agitation to herself.

Home, she whispered as she walked, home. And once home she could tell Melanie about it, and Melanie would---

Ms. Peach halted, indifferent to the curses of the people whose path she thus blocked. Melanie wouldn't be home when she got there. Undoubtedly Melanie had already committed herself to... overtime. For the

coffee. Which Ms. Peach had failed to procure...

Ms. Peach stared at the kiosks and vendors and people passing. A gleaming burgundy Mercedes glided by. A vendor of news-sheets exhorted passersby to read about the Great Debate between the Mayor and City Council. Tears welled up in Ms. Peach's eyes. She whispered to herself that not only the entire world but she and Melanie were mad, too. Everything mad, crazy, lost...

No, she must go back. Because of what Melanie had committed herself to doing. How else would she be able to look into her daughter's eyes when she arrived home after having done... overtime?

She could lie to Melanie, of course, and say that the rumor had been false, or that all the coffee had been sold by the time she had got there. But if she lied to Melanie then everything would be over, finished, desolate. Then she *would* be entirely alone.

Ms. Peach blinked furiously and gulped several times to force her quivering mouth and watery eyes into passable neutrality. She would have to go back. She would have to try again, taking another direction.

Crazy, Ms. Peach whispered as she pushed herself west. *We're all crazy in this city*. But always, whatever the situation, one did what one must. And in this case, that meant making a run for coffee.

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This story was published in *Terra Incognita*, No.1, Winter 1996/Spring 1997.

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