

## Peach

By Courtney Mason

**F**ive years ago: I am fresh. A peach. My hi-vis shirt is crisp from the packet and my steel caps new from the box. I am so excited for my first day on the job that I do not iron my top, and the boys onsite laugh at the rigid crease marks from where it was folded. I roll my eyes at them, then roll up my sleeves, feigning toughness while exposing downy forearm hair to the summer sun before retreating behind the crib room, where I can kick my boots against the base of the building to break them in. This is how we meet.

He is older and in charge. I like to make him laugh and he makes me come in the public bathrooms. Afterward, we drink bitter lattes from the bakery adjacent to the work site, pretending we are having a business meeting. My lips leave bruises along his neck and they peek from beneath his collar. It is my first professional job, and already I am breaking the rules, trying to prove I belong in this man's world amongst the dirt and sweat and grease and steel.

*In Australia only 16% of engineering graduates (across all fields) are female<sup>1</sup>. In my graduating*



*class, I was one of three women. On my first project, I was the only woman onsite.*

Four years ago: I am infatuated. In love.

He was raised on a diet of only child, and it shows. He has bright eyes, clear skin, and an ego. He likes things and has so, so many things. A charcoal barbeque. A PlayStation. A home gym.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics are sourced from the Engineers Australia, Women in Engineering Report, June 2022.

**Last night: I am in a dream world with him. He slashes my face with a scalpel. Left to right. North to South. The soft flesh of my face is scored like a fresh mango.**

A collection of electric guitars. He shares his things with me and in return I share myself. I open up and he peels me back, sliding small pieces of me into his mouth.

84% of female high school students claim the main barrier preventing them from choosing engineering as a career pathway is because it is a male-dominated field. The number of women entering the industry has remained stagnant for the last thirty years.

Three years ago: I am adapting. Growing up.

I am promoted and work on the biggest project in the state, a giant puzzle: aligning highways, bridges, and utilities in four dimensions. I solve a commercial problem and a man calls me a cunt in the afternoon meeting. Everyone is senior to me. No one moves to help. There is one other woman in the room and she looks at the floor. The company moves me to a different project. The man on the biggest project in the state continues to take bribes.

We move into an old, broken house in the northern suburbs to save for a deposit. When I look outside the window, all I can see are cracked

footpaths and old tyres. The floorboards drop away from the walls and cockroaches march in. I buy baits, but remain too scared to let my feet hang over the bed at night. None of my friends visit. He consumes me. Beneath the covers my skin rots and falls away; a dimpled black pit rests on the bed sheets.

55% of female engineers believe they have equal opportunities at work compared to their male colleagues. In contrast, 78% of men state both genders have equal opportunity, demonstrating that men are not as aware of the issues surrounding gender inequality as their female counterparts are.

Two years ago: I am budding. Becoming ripe.

We both work long hours, the same days with the same responsibility. But I still do the laundry and shop for groceries and remember family birthdays. We buy a townhouse in the city and fill it with my furniture and his things. After exhausting days onsite, we bitch about subcontractors while we walk in the dark to the pub for fifteen-dollar steaks.

When I want to go out with my friends he throws

his phone at me. The glass screen shatters on the pavement, back into the sand from which it was made. Look at what you made me do, he says.

There are no studies that discuss the unpaid household labour most (if not all) female engineers continue to do after outside work hours that their male peers do not.

One year ago: I am maturing. *Prêt à manger*.

I complete several large projects and my chartership. I have new post-nominals. He locks me out of the house overnight in the cold and screams at me if I leave dirty dishes in the sink. Everyone says relationships are about compromise and I try - I really do try so hard to believe this advice. He gives me breadcrumbs instead of a sandwich, and I am starved. I wonder if it is because I earn more than him now. To distract myself I start an MBA and complete assignments in the evenings while he drinks half a carton of beer and games in silence upstairs.

One-third of women in construction feel that they need to act like one of the boys to fit in. Otherwise, you resign yourself to a label of: mother, daughter, sister. But never: equal.

Six months ago: I thought I was first. But I was second. He had already chosen someone else to

be first.

I hear the words *coercive control* in a podcast and a bud of flame flickers inside my chest.

Last night: I am in a dream world with him. He slashes my face with a scalpel. Left to right. North to South. The soft flesh of my face is scored like a fresh mango. I try to conceal the wounds with foundation, but with each dab of the brush, the cuts widen, the makeup seeps in and in and in.

40% of women with engineering degrees abandon the field by their mid-thirties, and it's not because of children. The primary reason women leave is because of the lack of opportunities and growth, or bullying and harassment. The conclusion: women do not leave engineering because of the work; they leave because of the workplace itself.

Today: I am moving. On.

I print a resignation letter, renew my passport and pack a cardboard box with books and novelty coffee mugs. I leave the rest; he can keep all of my furniture and have all the things. I am going to climb Mount Everest.

I throw my steel cap boots in the bin and leave a dirty plate in the sink.

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Image: "[peaches](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [Kabsik Park](#)



“Futile” by Courtney Mason (2024)