

The Orange

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*All quotes are taken from John McPhee's fantastic little book *Oranges*.

I didn't realize my fascination with oranges until I realized my heart was one. Metaphors are useful tools, imagery that gives feet to experience, as well as a soft place for those feet to rest. In a moment of intense pain, when my heart seemed to produce a pitiful lack of juice in comparison with the intensity of the squeeze, and while searching for the right words to ease the pressure, I found the orange. I once took its easy existence for granted, the way Floridians also take warm ocean water and the months November through March for granted. I've always loved its juice, but until I felt the squeeze, I was blind to the fact that my chest cavity contained citrus.

It is my belief that everyone has an orange of his or her own—unidentifiable in an autopsy, it can never be shocked back to life, or operated on, or held in a latex glove. The whole world, all of us together, contain a grove of unseen oranges.

Here is the story of one.

"Oranges can set fruit parthenocarpically—that means 'by virgin development'—so they can develop a fruit even if the flower isn't fertilized."

Seeds

If I am never a mother, I still have experienced the birth of something that carries in it the desires I have for it, longings for it that may never be fulfilled. My writing is this—something allures me. I conceive an idea and have big dreams for it, but it too has a life and mind of its own and will wander

sometimes at will. And sometimes, I am simply too tired or too lazy or too intimidated to follow it and make it behave. Or show it what it was made for. I want it to like me.

Having never been a mother, I am only a witness to the path a parent walks when watching her child become more independent. Like a shoreline at the beach, the process from birth to independence is gradual, but suddenly drops off into a series of shelves and the deep waters beyond. The first shelf seems to be when a parent drops a child off at her first day of school, with a backpack the size of her body and squeaky new shoes and a sharp haircut. I heard an acquaintance say about his daughter's first day of school, "It's like my heart grew pigtails, put on a backpack, and walked into her classroom." If his heart grew pigtails, then mine can be an orange.

"[On the island], people halve oranges, get down on their hands and knees, and clean..."

If I am still, I can remember the sensation of the wind in my hair, lifting its brown strands and bringing them to a horizontal plane, moving like the waves in the sea. On the surface, I silently appreciate a cool scalp after spending a hot day crouched down, digging through glass, plastic, and personal items washed up by the sea. Underneath that thought lays the deeper layer of longing; it's been awhile since my hair has been touched or played with. The winds from a monsoon in Thailand fulfill a longing I didn't even know I had.

Mom? I looked up at her. I was small and brown from the sun. I had freckles and two missing front teeth. Mom? I whispered. We were in church. Play with my hair please? I settled back against the seat, my swinging legs coming to a stop as she ran her fingers through my hair.

I was older. Grown. I hated my hair, its wildness, its inability to make a decision to be straight or curly. He ran his hands gently through the waves. He said, if I could have picked the color and texture of hair of any woman in the world, it would be yours. It's crazy. It's beautiful. Like you. He let it slip through his fingers.

Then the rains come. Like a cup of water being poured out by an unseen hand, the tiny island is being baptized. Shrieking like children, my friends and I run for cover, the storm approaching the thatched restaurant, out of the wind and rain. The restaurant is next to a ditch where a survivor was found, waving her tiny hand wildly, waiting to be rescued. The rains come in horizontally and bring with them Mohammad.

Mohammad, like us, has discovered the plight of Kho Phi Phi on his travels around the world. Like us, Mohammad is young and committed to his faith. We spent the past few weeks digging through the tsunami-devastated island and tried to recycle beauty from the wreckage. We revealed the secrets of our own lives as we uncovered evidence of others: a baby's shoe, a driver's license, a pink plastic teacup. Mohammad worked elsewhere in his quiet way, talking to locals and staying away from the backpackers. And now the mon-

soon had blown him into the restaurant. He heard it was our last morning. He came to have breakfast with us.

As soon as he begins to speak, the wind picks up, blows our hair as we finish the pancakes and sip the coffee, whipped by wind and rain. His journey has been long: from Iran to Canada; to Everest's Base Camp; to Calcutta, India. He has been in Mother Theresa's House of the Dying, working there alongside nuns caring for dying men, lifting them, bathing them, giving them dignity in their last days. His eyes brighten as he remembers. Here I was, working alongside these little Catholic nuns, and when my thirty-six days were up, I told them I must go. To thank me, one of the nuns pulled me aside and told me she had a gift for me, but first would I tell her my name. I hesitated, for what she was about to give me was a cross on a chain. I told her my name, a dead giveaway to my faith, and without hesitating, she pressed the cross into my hand. There was something about her eyes, I don't know. His own eyes get misty. I see what was in her eyes in your eyes. He reaches out his hand to me in farewell, and I take it.

"An orange grown in Florida usually has a thin and tightly-fitting skin, and it is also heavy with juice. Californians say that if you want to eat a Florida orange, you have to get into the bathtub first."

Zest

What can be seen on the outside of a heart? What can be seen besides the roundness and the shape and color? The zest of an orange is also called the flavedo, the peel. Zest is passion, is appetite, is to relish. Both bitter and fragrant, zest can be added to a dish, creating orange confetti of color, texture, flavor...to make what is eaten delicious and beautiful.

What is on the outside of a person?

The outside of a heart?

Peel back the layers, and you will see the unseen. But you might have to get in the bathtub if you want to eat it.

Segments

My heart is equally divided into segments. The light days of childhood are where my sections begin. Days where Mom called me in from playing baseball or kickball, calling "It's getting dark!" Looking around, I could still see...the light was fading, yes, but there was still light. Half-heartedly obeying, I opened the front door, my feet black and sore from running on the asphalt all afternoon, and looked out the window. Nothing but darkness. I picture myself tagging the doormat just in time. She's safe!

The Oklahoma pastures. A slice of home. Dad and I are exploring on Grandpa's four wheeler, revving the engine up the tallest hill in the pasture.

I am safe hanging onto Dad's waist. All I can see is sky and tall grass blowing like waves. The tips of the grass are golden, and faraway in the distance, in the house on the side of the hill, a golden light comes on. Grandma is making dinner. And tonight we will eat, and tell stories, and laugh. We will sleep peacefully while coyotes howl.

London. I am in the British Museum, sitting in the library. I can sit here for hours, studying. If I tire of studying, I browse ancient books and touch polished wood. The walk to my flat is over an hour, but I know the way. I know I will walk home, and as I walk, the air will become crisper and the night darker and the lights of the city will come on.

Comraderie. My brother and I used to plant the seeds and pits of every fruit we ate. If we ate a peach, we planted the pit, still decorated with strands of yellow and orange-dotted flesh. If we ate an orange, we carefully extracted the seeds and placed them in the ground. Often we planted them so well that we couldn't find them once we'd buried them. We watered the spot we thought the seed was buried under and hoped for the best. We were a hopeful team of gardeners. We were always surprised when a tree did not grow.

Community. My first job in Switzerland was caring for the garden. I mowed the lawn at a slant and raked the grass. I worked with Charlie, a bartender from Pittsburg. The slanted lawns were on the side of the Swiss Alps, at a study center I attended. I will never have such a breathtaking garden to mow. The chalet I lived in was filled with people. People whose weight caused the ancient wood floors to creak as they walked down the hallway, people who filled the dining room with fresh bread and good conversation. People who played piano, and read poetry aloud, and smoked pot. People who belong in a section of my heart forever.

Faith. I hold onto the invisible rope that my grandmother held onto, and her mother before her. It's the rope my mom passed to me. I strain to see the rope, feeling foolish for curling my fists to grasp something invisible, something I haven't felt for a long time. Sometimes I feel the burn of the strands on my palms, and just in time I know it's there. I am safe.

"The taste and aroma of oranges differ by type, season, county, state, and country and even as a result of the position of the individual orange in the framework of the tree on which it grew."

I grew up into a family tree of farmers. Strong women, hard-working men. My first sense of home involves waking up to yellow curtains playing suck and blow with the window unit. I would listen to the sounds of the house, the purr of the unit that lulled me to sleep the night before, the sounds of voice and chairs scraping against the kitchen's linoleum floor. I lay in bed, feeling the softness of the ancient sheets, absorbing the feeling of belonging. I am home on this farm of Dwight and Estella Mae Little, my maternal grandparents.

The Dirty Thirties, those "worst hard times" hit my grandparents

hard soon after their marriage. In a small house of grays and browns were born two boys and a girl; when things got a little better and there was a little more money, another boy and two more girls joined the family, my mother the youngest of the six. I entered the lives of my grandparents after the tree's roots had sunk in deep and its trunk had been strengthened by the winds of the Dust Bowl Days. I entered their lives after a lifetime of hard work and sacrifice, cancer survival, and the loss of a son, after the ponds had been stocked with bass and catfish, after four wheelers were bought for the grandsons. After the chicken coop my aunt had detested stood empty for a couple of years and they could afford to fill their grandchildren to the brim with ice cream. I knew them after they had added a living room to their tiny house, a room covered with orange and brown carpet and a stone fireplace with stones that my mom, as a teenager, had helped her dad load into a truck. All of those moments, those newly added stones I had not been alive to add, built something that I simply enjoyed, at no cost or sacrifice of my own. It is on this tree my orange grows, and the roots are deep.

“Oranges were once the fruit of the gods, to whom they
were the golden apples of Hesperides...then, oranges be-
came the fruit of emperors and of kings ...”

I am still today, after my jog along the blue-gray strip of intercoastal. I walk into my house, the coolness of the ac wrapping around my body, clinging to the sweat running down my arms, neck, and back. It feels wonderful. But I feel the squeeze as soon as I stop moving. Just like the sweat, loneliness clings to me. My loneliness comes from a recent heartbreak, rejection by a man I loved more than anyone in the world. The words, *There's somebody out there better suited for you, there's somebody out there better suited for me don't cut.* They twist and press and cause the juice to flow, touching places in me that are raw and sore. I would have given him all of me, but he didn't want me. My thoughts echo like my footsteps around this empty house. I am alone.

The process of juicing:

The softness of an orange being grated against the sharpness of the juicer—the insides being pushed and twisted until the inside caves and narrows. The thick skin is still in tact, but the insides upon a closer look are twisted, frayed, gutted, and empty.

As I walk around in my empty house, I reach over to my dresser and pick up a picture. The stem that connects me to the tree. The picture is one of my favorites: it is the only picture taken of my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. They are dressed for Easter, posing in front of the peeling white church. Mom is three, the same age as my niece, cupping a handful of berries in her right hand. Grandma Little stands behind her, wearing glasses and an Easter hat and squinting like her daughter. Her mouth is closed in a tight line. The most graceful figure in the picture is my great-grandmother, Golden Clementine, who wears her name like a crown. I too am royalty. I am

from the same line as Golden Clementine.

“Among orange groups, the navel orange is an old one...“This orange imitates to some extent the fertility of the tree which bears it...”

My heart has grown into sections, plucked, peeled, and juiced. I wonder if I will ever feel its round fullness again, the way it felt on the farm, or in London, or with his hands in my hair. I must remember that I have been planted well; I must remember my roots go deep. Much has been planted inside of me. Who I am is what I have to offer, and it is all I have to offer. This is the offering I have cupped in my hands: my gift, my fight, my heart. An orange.