

## A SINGLE ORANGE

By Jin Fernbacher

I put back the crooked broom, wiping a hand over my forehead. My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten that day; my morning porridge was not on the counter when I walked into the kitchen. This had not been the first time I had skipped one of my meals, but recently it seemed I was missing more meals than I ate.

When I looked up, I saw the clean polished counter of the house I cleaned every weekend. But my eyes hadn't landed on the smooth metal on top of wood that shimmered in the morning sunlight or on the perfectly lined drawers on the side with their little silver knobs that were shined so clear you could see your reflection in their flat faces. No, my gaze landed on the single orange that rested in the wooden basket. Round and bright, the orange promised a soothing to my hunger and a delight to my tongue. I felt my mouth water and my stomach tighten, twisting into painful raw knots. I wanted the orange. I could imagine myself walking over to the counter and taking the orange, citrus stinging my nostrils as I peeled back the rough skin to reveal the plump ripe fruit inside. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten an orange. I longed to taste the sweet juice and feel it run over my lips as I bit into the fruit.

I pulled myself back, turning my gaze to the broom I had put down despite the hunger that gnawed in my belly. If I were caught stealing I would be whipped and I did not wish for a beating today. But hunger was like a parasite that clawed at you until you satisfied its needs. My eyes wandered back to the orange as my hands clenched into fists. But if I wasn't caught I could eat something, I could feed my hunger and enjoy a sweet. No, it was too big a risk, not worth the beating I was sure to get if I was caught. My hunger bit into my skin, clawed up through my

chest. It was a devil sent from hell. The orange taunted me, tempting me. I tried, I tried to fight it, but my craving for the twisted pain to stop won over.

I crept up to the counter, my hands shaking as I wiped a thin layer of sweat off on my maid's dress, but my hunger pushed me on. I reached up, letting my finger wrap around the rough skin of the orange before lifting it out of the basket and shoving it into one of the side pockets of my apron-like-dress. I held the pocket, feeling the fruit settle to the bottom as I made my way to the door.

“Where's the girl?”

My feet froze when I heard the sound of my mistress's voice. She was home early and had come in without my noticing.

She came around the corner from the door just as I pushed the orange deeper into the pocket of the dress.

“Ahhh, there you are. You better get home, you little runt,” she said, her voice stern as she jutted her chin at me.

I bowed my head, not meeting her cold stare. My heart pounded in my chest, the sound filling my ears as I answered her, “Yes, Miss.”

“What was that?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Yes, Miss,” I repeated, raising my voice so it wasn't a mumble.

She nodded, paying no more attention to me as she turned and walked away farther into the house.

I hurried out the door, keeping up my fast pace all the way down the street to the apartment my mother rented. My mistress was kinder to me than the ones I had had in the past. She wouldn't beat me, no, she would only use her harsh words and threats. It was her husband

who beat me. He whipped me if I forgot to dust the corners of the wall or left streaks on the windows.

When I reached my apartment I stepped inside to find my mother leaning against the wall looking out the only window. Our apartment was one room split into two by a large curtain that hung from the ceiling. A mattress was laid out on the floor for my mother and me to sleep on. On the other side we had a small wooden table and a kitchenette. I had no siblings and no father. At least, my mother never talked about him and I never pushed for answers, not wanting to see the tears that would well up in her eyes when I did.

She turned her head at the sound of my arrival, her eyes going straight to my dress, which I was clutching with my hands.

“What you get there?” she asked. Her voice used to be like a sweet melody but had been worn over the years to a stressed wrasp as she aged.

“An orange,” I answered truthfully.

“A what? Where did you get your hands on such a thing?” she asked in surprise.

“I took it.”

“From?”

“My mistress. It was on the counter so I took it.”

My mother began shaking her head. “No, you stole, that’s what you did.”

“I haven't eaten, I... I was hungry.”

“That is no excuse to steal.” She didn’t look angry like I had expected. No, her expression was sad, disapproving.

“We can share it. Please, mum, they have all the food they want and we have nothing.” I hated the disapproval in her gaze. It hurt to see I had done something to upset her after

everything she'd done to keep us under a roof. She worked herself past her limits and I knew she was doing everything she could to keep us from starving. But sometimes even her best wasn't enough.

I saw her mouth tighten at my words. "I will not eat something stolen. You will be beaten and you will deserve it."

It was a stab to my gut. A sting started in the back of my eyes. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

But my mother just shook her head and turned her back on me, walking behind the curtain out of my sight.

Tears started rolling down my face as I felt the weight of her disappointment. I sat down in our only chair, the wood creaking. I took out the orange, looking at it through a blurry gaze. Guilt made my gut turn as I stared at the orange in my hands. My mother's words still echoed inside my head, puncturing through my chest. *You will be beaten and you will deserve it.* She had never laid a finger on me and the concern of my being beaten was always shown on her face if I came home marked with bruises from one.

The guilt ate into the hunger, finally overtaking it. I ran to the window, yanking it down. I reached for the orange to throw it out when it fell, rolling over the floor. I went after it, picking up the fruit. The peel has been split on the floor, leaving a sweet citrus smell that traveled its way up my nose. My stomach growled knotting, my guilt twisted in my gut. No, I couldn't throw it out, I couldn't. But I couldn't live with the guilt rotting its way through my chest.

I would eat the orange to soothe my hunger, but I would take the beating tomorrow without a word of complaint to resolve my guilt.