

## Orange Slices

“Your mother sounds like a lovely woman on the phone.”

She was lying but I smiled politely, nodded in thoughtful agreement. Befuddling and confusing, maybe, but “lovely”? Distill my mother down to just the sound of a sharp voice grasping blindly for approximated vocabulary and having no regard for syntax, you wouldn’t end up with loveliness.

Adults always take an interest in you at the most inconvenient time. It was the last day of my first year of high school and I was the last one left in the classroom. The other kids rushed out in pairs and packs, sweet summer freedom’s call triggering some internal timer in them so they would explode if they didn’t leave right away. Maybe Mrs. Lasalle thought I was lingering on purpose, a subtle campaign for attention, for connection, a lonely girl quietly languishing all year until the desire to be finally seen proved too strong. I didn’t know what she—or any of the teachers I fearfully worshipped—thought of me. I imagine they didn’t think about me much at all.

She stood over my desk where I tried to force books and binders into my backpack at a faster pace. We’re the same height, but my chin stayed down as I breathed in her heavy perfume. Peonies.

“I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting your parents in person.”

*Well, Mrs. Lasalle, you see, I have to translate the school newsletter to them, and I chose to skip over the parent-teacher conferences part, I could’ve said. Instead I told her, “They’re always busy with work.”* There was a strand of hair stuck to my maroon skirt that I couldn’t seem to pick off.

“Of course,” she said sympathetically. “What kind of—“

“Sorry Mrs. Lasalle, I’ve got to run. Thanks for a great class.”

She said something after me about my impressive test scores, my meticulous notebook, but I couldn’t make time for compliments. She had said the magical words to trigger *my* internal timer.

Past rooms of wooden desks, the banner congratulating the class of 2004, clattering lockers, stomping and pitter-pattering black and brown pumps, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two steps from the freshmen hallway to the heavy double doors of the west entrance where my mom’s minivan stalled. She never picked me up or dropped me off at the front entrance, choosing a back road up to the faculty parking lot, swooping in and out like a condor.

“Amy!” She didn’t have to yell. I was clearly walking toward her. I looked around to see which heads were swiveling to the sound of the sharp voice, but luckily no one was around—all the sports teams had disbanded for the summer. A petite Chinese woman whose purple top clashed with her hunter green slacks, her hair in the usual knot near the base of her neck, sitting in a gray minivan with a dented front bumper she never got around to fixing.

Andy was in the backseat wearing his middle school uniform and, per the usual, reading a book that looked like it weighed more than he did.

She said to me in Mandarin, “What took so long?”

I responded in English, “I was talking to my math teacher.”

“Who? Oh yeah, I talked to her last week. Asked her if you can skip a grade of math.”

“Mom, that’s not how it works. I already told you. I’m taking geometry next year.”

“You already know geometry!”

“But that’s the *sequence*.”

“What? I pay too much money to that school for you to follow *sequence*.” This last word she said in English, missing the “qu” sound, but the sneering tone was what mattered.

After I stared out the window long enough, she grew soft and said, “I got you a cake.” I kept looking at the stop sign. Based on the road Mom had taken, I knew we weren’t going home.

“Are we having a party?” Andy half-asked, half-demanded.

“No, dummy, we’re going to the restaurant. There’s no party.”

“We’ll have a party at the restaurant,” Mom concluded.

When I was even younger, summers were blissful but unchanging. Aside from the one week of Vacation Bible School in June, the other days were pillars of uniformity. One hour of math and writing while Mom cleaned up after breakfast and got ready for work. Our neighbor Mrs. Whitney would come over to watch me—and later on, me and Andy. She dozed off in the armchair most of the time, so we watched cartoons on the four or five channels we got with our fickle antenna until noon when Mrs. Whitney kick-started herself again and made us chicken noodle soup or peanut butter and banana sandwiches. She’d let us ride our bikes to the library where Andy and I sat facing each other in the stacks, pressing the bottoms of our feet together while we survived on a steady diet of Nancy Drew and Judy Blume for me and Goosebumps and Hardy Boys for him. In the afternoon, we swam in the apartment complex’s pool, where Mom was

convinced one of us would drown and flop belly up like the half dozen or so cockroaches and spiders bobbing in the corners of the rarely-cleaned water, just like her third cousin who drowned in a river near her hometown in China. She was superstitious and believed in curses. Then more math worksheets and grammar practice at the dinner table until Mom came home with food from the restaurant, a twenty dollar bill for Mrs. Whitney, and questions for me and Andy about what we learned about the world that day.

*The square root of 36 is six. We need to try harder, do better, and go farther than other kids, because we are not like other kids. We are immigrants and they will always see us as "them." The third law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of a system at absolute zero is a well-defined constant.* Our parents are never around but that's because they love us, that's because they know about have-notness, and they don't want that for us, they want us to have, and that's why right now we can't have them around.

When I turned ten, I graduated from Mrs. Whitney's care (little Andy wasn't allowed to ride his bike to the library or swim in the pool by himself, so he cried for a week) into my first position at the restaurant. I started with simple tasks I could do to earn my allowance of five dollars a week.

For example, my little hands were good for folding roll ups. Take one paper napkin, open it up into a large rectangle, place the fork so that the handle and tines point to opposite corners, fold down the corners over the ends of the fork, roll the napkin like a burrito, tight but not too tight, and make a neat stack in the plastic bin.

After I got As on my English essays in 5th grade, Dad let me proofread the menus before he took the edited version to Kinko's. The box he brought back smelled sweetly of ink, still radiating the heat of the printer. I'd try to avoid paper cuts as I made trifolds

so that the logo—the Chinese character for “luck” in red ink under the name *Emperor’s Garden*—showed on the front. The menu had 80 items—why did we have so many?—including 20 lunch combinations (spelled with two i’s and two o’s thanks to me).

At eleven I was promoted to the cash register, where I smoothed out the creases of one’s, twenty’s, and the very rare fifty and tucked them in their right slot, like playing Monopoly with Andy. This mid-level position was also where I learned how to hit a roll of quarters against the edge of the counter—a hard enough whack so that the wrapper broke but not with so much force that Mom would look at me disapprovingly and tell me not to startle the customers—then crack the roll open like an egg, spilling new coins into the partitioned drawer. I was pretty decent as a cashier, a kid who smiled sweetly and always gave the correct change with the obligatory, “Have a nice day, come back soon,” but delivered with the right amount of brightness and sincerity.

I was always convinced Andy was Mom’s favorite, her baby boy in a family with too many women, but Dad and I had our own secret silent language. During a busy lunch shift, Mom waited tables, Dad’s wok sizzled and crackled, our only other employee Edna shuffled between the dish pit and the service station, and I filled take-out orders by putting the right styrofoam boxes and plastic soup containers in the right brown paper bags. Inevitably, as the heat from the kitchen rose, as the pace of Edna’s mechanical shuffling slowed because of her bad knees, as the number of customers asking for extra sauces multiplied, Mom would start to lose her cool and mumble her criticism at each one of us as she blew by like an unpropitious wind.

“Edna, you know that doesn’t belong there.”

“This order waited for too long, Amy.”

“Tssssk, James, just let me do it.”

“Andy, get out of the way.”

Meanwhile, Dad and I looked sideways at each other, wiggled our eyebrows and pursed our lips, doing impressions of Mom running around like a chicken with its head cut off. We kept our poker faces when she turned to look at us in turn while Andy burst out laughing.

The truth is, I didn't hate it. I actually had fun most of the time, but I wouldn't admit that to anyone. Dad could always make me laugh, I liked chatting with our regular customers who left me dollar, two-dollar tips. The food that Dad made just for us after the shift ended, not the greasy and over-salted stuff he sold to Americans, tasted of a homeland I never knew.

But The Emperor's Garden wasn't where *regular* kids worked. The other kids I knew had summer jobs at the movie theater, or sitting atop the lifeguard chair, ready to save lives if needed, or babysitting, but really just eating snacks and watching TV while the toddler slept—it all sounded glorious to me. A chance to make new friends, maybe even meet cute boys, get great tans, and come back in August with slightly exaggerated stories that sounded more like an MTV reality show than real life. I didn't even have enough life experience to fabricate anything half-believable.

Here's how my story would go. I went home every day smelling like frying oil. The only person I worked with who wasn't a member of my family was a 62-year-old Cambodian woman who couldn't hear too well in her left ear. Our restaurant was on the not-as-nice-as-the-other-side side of town. It was in a shopping center on a long avenue of shopping centers that all looked the same—taupe shingled roofs and pinkish brick.

We had a laundromat to our left and a real estate office to our right. The police station was a couple of blocks away, and if someone pulled off the highway a little too early on their way to the historical parts of downtown, they might find themselves driving past our sycamore trees-choked parking lot, and if their window was down, they would definitely smell something greasy and potent.

We drove around back and parked a few feet away from the dumpster. Dad was already waiting at the back door, beaming at me as he always did.

“There she is,” he said. “She survived the first year of Snobby School.” He took the cake my mom handed him and tried to pull Andy’s book away from him, a book Dad wouldn’t be able to read except a few words here and there. With his full head of hair and crinkly eyes, my dad wore his world-weariness on the inside. He was a mountain that poverty and stress didn’t wear down, disappointment and embarrassment couldn’t chip. He had us kids, so he gave, and gave, and gave some more, never mind that the world gave him only us in return. And what did we give him?

It’s the lull between the lunch and dinner shifts, so Dad had time to join us in the back corner booth to eat the cake. Andy ran to the soda machine and brought me a plastic cup of Sprite, then ran back to fill another cup for himself, mixing the Coke with the Sprite as I know he likes to do, pretending he’s a mad scientist. They all seemed happy for me, proud of me. The cake had my name written in blue icing, but the A in my name was turned into an “A+”. So tacky, a typical Mom move.

My dad was right to call it Snobby School. The kids there lived in houses with pools in the backyard—*real* pools, not apartment complex pools cleaned with infrequency. Some of the seniors pulled into the parking lot in brand new BMWs. One

of the boys in my grade was the mayor's son, and another one was the daughter of the dean of the nearby university. We wore our uniforms with the maroon H for Hibben Prep not just because our girls' volleyball team won the state championship four years in a row, not just because we had the highest rate of acceptance to Ivy League schools in the whole state, but because no matter what secret fears we held, we knew that it was much scarier outside, that as long as we linked our identities with Hibben, we were protected, inoculated, and untouchable. And it was nice to be on the inside, to be untouchable. So we each played our role, perpetuating the myth that shielded us and fortified the myth because the more we believed—like seeing the image of the Virgin Mary's face in a piece of toast—the more real it became. That was our first real-world lesson, and maybe the one that mattered the most to the future CEOs and senators among us.

I went into Hibben nervous and ignorant, but one school year later, it didn't matter whether or not I subscribed to the myth. A force that strong is not something you choose, it's something that catches you Venus flytrap-style, and slowly digests you.

I chewed my cake without being able to enjoy it. The artificial taste of the frosting told me that Mom didn't buy this cake from the fancy bakery near my school but probably from the grocery store near our apartment. Why spend money on something that should taste good when every penny could go toward my tuition, or future SAT prep classes? In a few years, Andy will need maroon sweaters and ties, and on and on it goes. We were sharks with insatiable appetites, swallowing our parents' hard work, sleeplessness, occasional humiliation (he studied to be a mechanical engineer in China, she was an acclaimed cellist), and devotion.



Would I call it devotion? At fourteen, I saw it as blind servitude. I was studying the Enlightenment at school, I was reading Thoreau. All my parents could think about was money and status. Everything had a practical purpose because practical was the only type of purpose. But while they were watering the seed of my future, there was growing in my belly a monster named fear. The ultimate fear—the fear of disappointing them.

We put the cake in the fridge next to the to-go salads. Andy sat with me at the cash register, his nose back in his book, as we all took a deep breath before the dinner shift. It was a Friday night, the one night of the week that Edna couldn't come in because she went to visit her sister at a nursing home, so it made for a real family affair. My summer was starting, and I thought I was ready to accept it—at least I could be myself and not a Hibben drone.

I wasn't ready for our first customers of the night. They caught me completely off guard, Caitlyn O'Connell with her mother, father, and older brother. The bell on top of the door twinkled as the four of them walked in and stared dumbfoundedly at our corny Asian decorations—ruby-red lanterns, Chinese calligraphy in cheap frames, a golden money cat smiling stupidly and waving its paw. Caitlyn and her dad both wore Lacrosse polos. Her mom was in a Lily Pulitzer dress. Only her brother was dressed like he wasn't planning on stopping by the country club after dinner. I thought to myself that my family and I were the upside-down version of them.

“Hello, anywhere you'd like to sit,” my mom told them, unaware that she was addressing one of my classmates and her family.

“Hey,” Caitlyn said, looking directly at me, her voice void of any emotion.

“Hi.”

As they glanced around them, assessing which table was the least offensive, my mom whispered to me, “You know her?”

“Yeah, she goes to my school.”

“You go serve them.”

“*Mom*. No.”

“Go.”

I watched Mrs. O’Connell frown at her menu like it was a map written in ancient Sumerian. She flipped to the next page, raised an eyebrow, and flipped back to the first one. Caitlyn and her mother had the same color nail polish. Did they get manicures together? The thought of my mother paying someone else to do something as pointless as putting tickle-me-pink on her dull and chipped nails struck me as absolutely absurd. Meanwhile, Mr. O’Connell had his arms on the table, leaning forward to steal looks at what Caitlyn was typing on her phone.

“What are you waiting for? Go see if they have any questions.” I told myself I’d done this a hundred times, to just go through the usual steps of service, to treat them like any other customers.

But they’re not. I’m not just an anonymous Chinese girl taking their order at a restaurant on the wrong side of town. My cover was blown, my worlds were colliding. Nothing good could come from this, but I had no choice but to tug the strings of my apron tight, take out my notepad and pen, and walk towards my undoing. Was it just my imagination or did their whiteness create a halo of light around their corner table?

I stood over them and could smell Mrs. O's perfume. She smelled the way that rich ladies should smell, something floral and not cloying. Mr. O smiled at me with curiosity, and even Caitlyn put down her phone. Her brother didn't know I existed. I took a deep breath and launched into my spiel.

"Welcome to the Emperor's Garden. My—" I paused and recovered myself—I would usually say my name at this point—"I'll be your server tonight. Would you like anything to drink besides water?" My game plan was to ignore the elephant in the room, namely Caitlyn's obvious look of recognition. As I jotted down their drink orders, it seemed possible that the plan would work. I came back in a few minutes and put a pot of green tea and four cups on the table.

"So Caitlyn says you go to Hibben. What a crazy little coincidence!" I made eye contact with Mr. O as I slid a cup next to his glass of water and poured the tea.

"She hates it when we meet her friends, don't you Caitie? How embarrassing to be caught with your boring old folks, right?" I smiled back at Mr. O but didn't know what to say.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that I wasn't the only one who felt like her cover was blown. Caitlyn was blushing as her parents asked me about classes and sports and her dad attempted corny dad jokes. For a sliver of a second, Caitlyn and I shared a similar predicament, but that similarity was short-lived.

"Dad, you talk too much. We're not the only customers here, you know." She was right. The room had started to fill up, and I had two tables I still needed to greet. As far as high school politics went, Caitlyn O'Connell had a solid place in the one percent—she was wealthy enough, pretty enough, cared enough about her grades,

participated in the right clubs and sports, but more importantly, she exuded something intangible but undeniable. Whatever that girl had, they should've bottled it and sold it at fancy department stores.

Mr. O acted like he didn't hear her. "We never would've come here if Brandon here didn't have the most intense craving for Chinese food in the world. I didn't even know this place existed." He paused for a microsecond. "I guess I'm just an oblivious old dude."

"Bran's back from his third year at Dartmouth. Just visiting for a few days before he heads off to Thailand, right Bran?" Mrs. O glanced adoringly at her son the whole time she spoke. Meanwhile, he fiddled with his chopsticks, glancing around at his family like they were strangers on a bus he was stuck with until the next stop.

"Thailand sounds cool," I offered.

"Where in Asia are you from?" Mr. O asked.

"Oh, the part of Asia called New Jersey." They didn't get it. "It's a joke." The parents smiled on cue. "I was born in Jersey. But my parents are from China."

"I would *love* to visit China one day," said Mrs. O. "What a beautiful culture. So much history." I nodded.

"I should go see if your orders are ready."

They ordered the stereotypical dishes—General Tso's chicken, shrimp lo mein, crab rangoons—and way too much of it. As I was grabbing multiple plates, my mom reached for a few to help me carry them.

"No, mom, go talk to table 4. I haven't been over in a while."

"I can bring these and then go to table 4, no big deal."

“No, go *now*. Please.”

I was so relieved that she listened to me that the peculiar look she gave me didn't register. I went over to the O'Connells, balancing hot plates that smelled the way my hair and clothes would smell hours later when they would drive in their BMW back to their lives and I would stay soaking—literally—in mine.

“Yes, I'm starving,” Caitlyn said as she and her brother drove chopsticks in like it was a race to the finish. I came back with the rest of the food and stepped back to assess the situation.

“Is there anything else I can bring you guys?”

“No, everything looks wonderful. Thank you, Annie.”

I shouldn't have been surprised that Caitlyn didn't know my name and misinformed her parents. I didn't bother to correct them.

Once they started eating, Mr. and Mrs. O launched into their own conversation while Caitlyn and her brother ate in silence. Mrs. O took bird-sized bites, Mr. O used up a lot of napkins. Caitlyn had to flip her long brown hair every once in a while to keep it from touching the food. Brandon was definitely stoned and his parents were completely oblivious. Caitlyn probably knew and ignored him—they each had their own survival tactics.

In essence, they were a family like thousands of other families existing at that very moment. Like mine, in fact. But I couldn't get over their intangible glow.

“Yes, boxes would be great. Oof,” Mrs. O patted her flat stomach, “I ate way too much. This all was so good.”

“You satisfied, Bran?” Mr. O tried to engage his son, who just gave him a thumbs up and tossed one more crab rangoon in his mouth.

“I’ll be back with the boxes and the check.”

I was so relieved that the whole ordeal was about to be over that I didn’t react quickly enough, didn’t understand what was happening until it was too late. As I took the half-finished plates to the back to pack it all in to-go containers, my mom went past me in the other direction, holding a plate of orange slices.

“Wait—“ I started to say, but I couldn’t turn my body too quickly without dropping the plates. As soon as I could put them down, I went after her, but she was already at their table, beaming down at them while they looked at her politely and confusedly. For a few seconds, I watched her gesticulate while she talked to them. They nodded, smiled, laughed. I looked away and started packing the leftovers, a red flush spreading up to the roots of my hair and down my throat.

By the time I came over with everything bundled in a plastic bag, my mom was already back to buzzing around the room, pouring water and clearing tables.

“Amy, you didn’t tell us that those are your *parents!* We just met your mom. She brought us these delicious oranges, so thoughtful of her.”

They all looked at me with something like pity, but ever slightly tinted with mistrust. Even Brandon was more alert with curiosity.

“I thought this was just your summer job. I had no idea this was a family business. So impressive. You’ve been here for almost twenty years?” Mr. O looked around the place as if seeing it for the first time.

“It’s not easy to keep a restaurant open, I have a few friends in the industry and they always talk about how tough and competitive it is.”

“And your dad’s the head chef? How wonderful!”

“Sorry I got your name wrong,” Caitlyn added, the same way she’d said, “I’ll have brown rice instead of white rice.” I wanted to say to her, *would you have said something if you were in my place?* But she would never be in my place, and she would never know what it’s like to not have something intangible. My world consisted of paper menus, roll ups, cash registers and take-out containers—everything was tangible.

They rode off with their leftovers back to the other side of town, while my night continued until the last table was cleared, the floors were mopped, the money in the register counted, and the dishes left drying. Andy came out of the back room where he’d been reading and playing Gameboy all night. My dad looked tired but still cheery, his hair wet from the water he splashed on his face to feel a little less grimy. My mother hadn’t talked to me or looked at me much after the O’Connells left.

We gravitated toward each other near the back door when it came time to lock up and head home. I held a bag with the remains of my cake, and Mom carried a crate of oranges. They were a gift from the grocer we buy our produce from—she would cut them into perfectly equal slices when we got back to our two-bedroom apartment’s folding kitchen table. Andy and I were only allowed fruit for dessert, and I often went to bed with the smell of citrus on my fingertips.

Dad drove and let Andy sit in the passenger seat. Mom sat with me in the back.

“Your friend’s family are nice people.”

“She’s not my friend, mom. We don’t hang out with the same people.”

“Who do you hang out with?”

*No one, I thought. Well, you, Dad, and Andy. You're all I have.*

Her silence gave me time to think about that peculiar look she gave me earlier, and I realized that it had been a look of shame. Shame for me or for herself?

“You're too good to hang out with her,” she said suddenly in a lowered voice.

“You're better than her. You're better than them.”

She may have been looking at her own reflection in the car window, a mirror against the dark streets that led to our apartment. I wanted to believe her, holding back a salty lump in my throat, of guilt, of shame, of simultaneous determination and defeat. It would've been good enough just to reach for her hand and bring her out of her thoughts back to where she was with me, in a car with her family, her future and hope, in a city she never knew existed when she was my age, before she was tossed from one side of the world to another, a world that can become incomprehensible, if she let it.

We didn't talk anymore on that car ride. Attempting to delineate her after all these years is hard because I was always the mask she had to wear.