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The little orange way to know my mother

MY MOTHER'S FINGERNAIL PIERCES the skin of the orange, and suddenly the crisp droplets of its sweet smell fill the air. She hands me the plump wedges, the white inner skin carefully peeled away. When I bite into one, I use my hand to catch the juice that's dripping down my chin. Somehow, she has convinced me that this fruit is the best afterschool snack that I can have, better than any cookie or rice crispy treat. She watches my face as I slurp down section after section. She asks me if the oranges are sweet and when I answer yes, she finally takes one for herself.

Sometimes my sister and I would come home from school, and my mother would be sitting in front of the television, paper towel laid out in front of her with chunks of empty orange skins heaped in a pile. Her elbows would be propped on the table with her hands in the air, sticky fingers spread apart, and her eyes glued to her soap opera on the little black-and-white, waiting for a commercial so she could run to the sink and wash off the juice. Then she would set out our own paper towels, peel us our own oranges.

During the winter, my mother always made sure there were plenty of oranges in our house. They were among the only seasonal fruits available during the cold months in New England. And on Chinese New Year there would be red bowls filled with big fat oranges, smaller thin-skinned tangerines, and cute little clementines. In the days following, we would eat them at every meal, trying to finish them before they spoiled. Nothing disappointed my mother more than when an orange went bad, a soft green or white powdery spot betraying the fruit's freshness

"Ay-yah," my mother would say as she threw them away. They made a heavy thud at the bottom of the kitchen trashcan.

Then she would turn to us and say, “We will eat these faster.” A pronouncement of fact more than anything else. We would not waste them.

She had grown up in New York City in a crowded apartment with her family and thought that life in the suburbs was a great gift to bestow upon her children. When my sister and I were young, we moved (“for the schools”) from the city streets to the strange quiet of the suburbs. But even though our white aluminum-sided house was far away from the vegetable stands of Chinatown, she remained determined to feed us fresh fruits and vegetables, as her mother had done when she was a child.

On our monthly visits to grandparents and other relatives, my mother did much of her grocery shopping in Chinatown where oranges were sold everywhere in high pyramids on the sidewalk instead of in plastic bags like at the supermarket near our house. Bundled in her thick winter coat and clutching her purse, she was easy to spot in the swarming crowds that stretched through the narrow, crooked streets. From the warmth and safety of the car, I noticed how carefully she sorted through the piles of vegetables, towers of fruit, and bins full of ginger and garlic, tossing aside the ones that weren’t big enough, didn’t look fresh enough, just weren’t any good.

And she always bought an entire box of oranges, as big as softballs with prominent navels, because she believes that they are sweeter and juicier than the ones whose navels are hidden. After talking to my mother, the man behind the fruit stand would nod and smile, and then motion to a boy who would bring out a big box on a handtruck from somewhere in the back of the store. I’d watch as the boy took off the lid with gloveless hands and my mother inspected the box, picking up one and then another. Looking at them. Smelling them. She would point to our station wagon with the out-of-state plates that was double-parked in front of the store, and the boy would wheel the box right over and heave it into the trunk. The boxes seemed huge and endless, holding afternoons of snacks and evenings of desserts.

While the rest of my friends from school were eating canned peas and frozen corn, my mother served soup with winter melon

from our garden and bright green leafy vegetables that had been preserved in red plastic bags, tucked into the crisper for weeks, and then wilted into a submissive pile on the plate, which we would have to finish “or else.” My sister and I begged for ice cream or cake for dessert, but instead we got fruit—freshly washed bunches of grapes, fleshy chunks of cantaloupe or honeydew, and, of course, oranges.

When we ate oranges after dinner, my mother would slice them in half with her cleaver and then cut each half into thirds. Thwack! Thwack! Then she would come to the table with a plate full of even, uniform, slices of orange, skin-side down and looking like a sea of orange smiles. Each one would rock back and forth, always threatening to totter right off the plate and onto the red linoleum floor.

There are two ways to cut an orange. One is to cut it along the sections, so that each slice holds its own wedge of orange. The other way is to cut it through the middle along the equator, so that each slice presents the cross section of many pieces of orange, like teeth or piano keys. I prefer to eat it the latter way, and I told my mother this as soon as I was old enough to figure out how I liked my oranges cut. I never had to tell her this again.

If the oranges were sweet and juicy, I felt like I could eat an entire plate by myself. My mother once reprimanded me when I was little, because I would wrap my baby teeth around the slice and suck the juice until the slice was dry, but leave the membrane of the slices and chunks of pulp. She showed me how to push at the center of the slice and separate the pieces from each other into smaller wedges. They looked even more like teeth, except instead of smiling, they were now pointy and menacing. She bit off each little section so the insides were perfectly clean, as if someone had taken a razor and sliced out the orange flesh of every piece.

With the smell of dinner still hanging in the air, my mother would watch us as we took our first bites of the oranges she had cut for us. And as she did with our afterschool snack, she asked us, “Is it sweet?” over and over. She examined our faces to see if we were trying to trick her. By the time we convinced her that

the oranges were, in fact, sweet enough, half of the plate would already be inside of our full stomachs. My mother, my father, my sister and me—we would sit around the wooden table in the kitchen, sucking and slurping up the orange slices until they were gone, and all that was left were the rinds.

Whenever I smell an orange, I think of us sitting there around the table. I am still young enough that when my parents ask me about my day, I tell them everything. The citrusy wet scent punctuates the air, cutting through anything else that might be around. And suddenly, a cold day is warm and I am waiting for my mother to dig up a few of the best ones from the box in the basement and cut them for our dessert.

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