

Haunted by Oranges

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My father served in World War II. On the German front. He wasn't a U.S. citizen at the time. He was a student from abroad, with a recent diploma from the University of California at Davis. He had been waiting for a response from Cornell's graduate school in the agricultural sciences. Instead he received a draft notice.

Consider it an invitation to see Germany. After all, and legally speaking, the U.S. Army cannot draft foreigners. Not even during World War II. But it can demand that they leave the country if they choose not to join up. Even if there is a German blockade.

Even if there is no way to go home.

He received his acceptance letter from Cornell in boot camp. But it was too late by then. It was often too late or too early for my father. Luck is like that. Perhaps it skips generations.

Everything else seems to.

The family plan had been for him to learn all the latest agricultural science, return home, and implement the new techniques on the family farm. The oldest son was at Cambridge, learning

British law—an indispensable tool for those who find themselves involuntarily participating in the British Empire. And the youngest son was staying home with Mom, and partying in Tel Aviv on weekends. The family farm included acres and acres of orange groves. My father's family was the richest family in the region. They had been that way for generations. They were used to wealth.

Despite British occupation, certain modernities had not quite made it to where my father's family lived. My father's father, apparently, was a calculating prodigy. Even in his old age, he would sit at his favorite café drinking coffee, smoking, and chatting with friends. Simultaneously, he'd listen courteously to the next person on line recite a string of numbers, and then make a request: a percentage, a sum, whatever. He'd tap his head once or twice, mutter under his breath—this was showmanship—and then provide the correct answer. He'd be offered something, some fresh-baked bread, newly-pressed hummus, olive oil, beautifully stiched white linen, more rarely some money, all of which he'd quietly decline. Repeatedly. Apparently, it was the custom in those parts to offer to pay numerous times before graciously giving up. But, after all, he was rich. He owned land, and rather a lot of it. And he acknowledged the sheer luck of his circumstances daily by dispensing small gifts to the less fortunate. *Everyone else*, in his case.

Many years later, long after he and his world had died, I came into the picture. And not coincidentally, my mother would lecture her friends that poor people need to be careful with their money, hoard very small change in order to purchase diapers, an occasional toy, aspirin, shoes. Children grow really fast, after all. Especially their feet. So *Tony* can't be giving money away to just any *bum* who rings doorbells, who talks about being down on his luck. We're all

down on our luck around here, she'd say, that why we live around *here*—with lots of other poor people, and not in Westchester. In a mansion or something. He doesn't get it, one of her friends would say back, he still thinks everyone else is worse off than he is. He doesn't look it, but he's very confused. He's in another world.

“Tony” wasn't my father's name, by the way. My mother couldn't pronounce my father's name. Neither could her friends. I never could either. So she called him Tony. So did his army buddies. I called him Dad. I can't pronounce my legal name either. Or my middle name, since it's his first name. This all probably means something.

My father had to carry a weapon. He was a soldier, of course, but he and the others in his unit built bridges, supply lines, all the infrastructure that connected the front—one that never retreated—to its sources of nourishment.

He'd discovered a frightened German soldier hiding in a barn. The adolescent begged not to be turned in. He'd heard stories about Americans. Bad stories. And my father's German, good enough for fundamentals—*Ich erschiess dich nicht, Hier ist etwas zum essen*—wasn't good enough to explain to the soldier that surrendering to Americans was a very good thing. This was way too subtle for my father's German. A couple of days, my father thought, he'd figure out how to explain things somehow, calm him down. Meanwhile, like a child with a baby bird, he'd sneak the boy food each evening. Two evenings in a row, maybe three. Until the kid was shot dead. Surprised by another American soldier who was also a kid himself, who saw the German uniform in the barn in the dark accompanied by some ominous movements, and who shot first

like he was always told to. My father saying to him later, looking at the body, some eggs in his hands, *why'd you shoot him? He didn't have any weapons.*

Land. Sometimes it's all about the land. After the war, my father traveled around. He went to New York. He went back home for a spell. Saw Mom, his brother, his nieces. Eventually he went to England. To study the details of what happens to his oranges after they leave his farm, after their long journey to England. He took on a job as an orange inspector. He was out to learn about everything involved in the process. That was in 1947 or so. Then Israel was established. And the borders of Israel were stipulated to include his land.

My father liked taking mathematics classes in college. He did well in them, and they didn't tax his English. He could get high grades, push up his GPA. He also liked taking judo. You learn to fall down. Repeatedly.

My father belatedly accepted the American citizenship that was offered to him because of his service in the U.S. Army. Not coincidentally, Israel had instituted a law that forfeited ownership of one's property if one was a refugee. Sometimes two plus two does equal five.

He wasn't a refugee, he explains to the attaché at the Israeli consulate. He had been in England at the time. For quite a bit of time, actually. Papers to prove it. He was a U.S. citizen, served on the, ahem, *German* front. Papers to prove it. It's a bit too early, the attaché explains. Lots of fighting going on. Big mess. Dead people all over the place. Come back later. You know, in a few years. When things are calmer. Um, my father says. Did you hear, the attaché adds enthusiastically, that

Einstein might become president of Israel? That would be so cool. Einstein, my father says, I think I've heard of him. Didn't he invent the atomic bomb?

He didn't know. He really didn't know. He'd gone to college, of course. But he hadn't taken any physics. I explained to him. Many years later. What Einstein had actually done.

He seemed intelligent, educated. You'd think he'd learn from experience. *There is no security in anything, not ever.* But no—land was security, nothing else. It was just after the war, and refrigerators were a big deal. Time to phase out the prewar *ice box*. Not coincidentally, the Veterans Administration wanted to do something good by its boys who had served the country so well. A program to learn how to repair refrigerators. And after graduating, a certificate, and a small amount of money to start a business, buy tools, set up shop.

My father, flush with the knowledge of the innards of refrigerators, used the money instead as a downpayment on a house. Mortgage supplied by one or another shady character with a heavy Brooklyn accent. Banks weren't an option. And then another house. And another. And then a delicate balancing act lasting many years. And his investment paid off quite handsomely. But not, of course, in his lifetime.

I grew up on a diet of oranges. Perhaps that explains my acid reflux, my chronic heartburn. They were everywhere in our home, waiting patiently to be eaten. I learned to sightread oranges: age, moisture content, buoyancy, all from a glance, a brief sniff, and the professional heft of one into the air in a supermarket. I knew their nutritional exchange rate with other fundamental foods:

olives, yogurt, eggs. And other useful knowledge too: how one grafts orange trees onto lemon-tree roots (because orange-tree roots are too delicate). What role insects play (a big role, as you might have guessed). And fun stuff: how to castrate a sheep (it only hurts them for a minute, apparently), how pretty a cow's eyes are. The differences between how sheep eat grass and cows eat grass and how that affected the sociology of the American West. It was years before I knew how odd knowing all this was.

Here's how I come into the story. We are in a supermarket and he's buying oranges. These oranges are from *Jaffa*, he tells me, they might even be from my very own groves. Look at how superior they are. Um, I say. Superior, I say. To be honest, they look like *oranges*.

Jaffa. Another one of those annoying words that I can't quite say right. A constriction in the throat that I can't get down the way a native speaker of Arabic does with ease. I hated it when those words showed up. And it happened a lot. After all, my father spoke a foreign language. One that I didn't understand. And couldn't learn.

Could they really be from your groves? I ask. Yep, he says. Don't you think they were stolen from you? I ask. Yep, he says. So, I say, I don't get it. Why you're buying them. From someone else. He says: They're really good oranges. The best oranges. Try one.

I didn't say what I thought. No adolescent ever does. These are not your oranges, I thought. Your groves are gone, I'm sure, replaced by concrete, by tall buildings, by sky-high real estate values. Not even a hint left that you were ever there, the landscape so totally cleansed of evidence of

you, that your ancestors have no places to even *haunt*. This way, when children are born in the new land, the fresh world, they'll be totally innocent. I don't say any of this, of course, I say instead: Um, I'll pass. We're in a supermarket after all, I tell him. You haven't *bought* them yet.

This orange thing, it's gotta stop. There are other fruits after all. Kiwi, for example. I bring him one. It's hairy, he says. Yes, I say, but that's something you can get past. Surfaces aren't everything. You slice it like this. And eat it like this.

He tastes it slowly. He's really trying to give it a chance. Nods his head. Well, he says finally, it isn't an orange. So much, in other words, for the kiwi. He has dismissed it quietly in exactly the same way that he had once dismissed cheese with nuts in it when someone brought him some. Not natural. Cheese isn't *supposed* to have nuts in it. And this. Not an orange. Not even close.

Not all statements of fact are statements of fact. Some of them are criticisms. Some statements of fact have normative aspirations. They aspire to criticize what we have done, or what we have allowed to happen.

Regardless. There are limits to what can be said aloud after the fact. You do not tell this father that he is obsessed with oranges. You do not tell him to get over it. When he fantasizes about moving to Florida, because there are oranges down there, perhaps a grove that can be purchased, you just nod. You already know this isn't going to happen, that he's going to die first.