

The Orange Tree

Avery Luft

The orange tree slouched against the white paneling of my uncle's stand-alone mobile home in the back of our property. Before construction to create the family commune, the land was a nursery full of exotic plants crowded with dark plastic pots. The jungle of orange trees, large ferns and blossoming hibiscus flowers had been displaced to clear the plots and build homes. Over time, the Florida storms had eroded the guarded plants where they spilled out of their pots and dug into the dirt to survive. The orange tree grew up uncomfortably; leaning into the white paneled structure and growing into a tall child.

I knew our property was filled with things from the past. Rusting cars, back-trailers of old nursery tractors, shards of milk bottles, and black plastic tarps that line the underneath of the ground like soil. The white castle of a house that my parents had built together gleamed like a lighthouse post through the hanging moss at nighttime, calling us home when the sun started to set. There were acres of land to explore; oak trees whose branches dipped into the clouds, the railroad tracks only a quarter mile behind the tree line, and a steep ravine that served as a border.

“Be back by lunch time!” My mother would call from the safety of the sliding glass door. We knew that when we returned she would be alone. No matter how many times we entered the woods with a Narnia-based sense of hopefulness, each time we came back the house was always less full than it once was. Dinnertime would be a quiet poking of the forks into homemade omelets, Dad’s seat ajar and empty. My sibling and I stumbled off the porch and into the forest, waving a

nonchalant hand behind our backs as her instructions sunk into the humid breeze.

I charged through the underbrush of the wilderness with Mira behind me. We weed wacked the tall stems with large sticks, bounced against the roots, and were deliberate to avoid the sword sized thorns on the hanging ivy.

“Careful,” I called to Mira, holding the stick above my head and moving a large twist of daggers into the air. “These ones are really sharp.”

Mira ducked under my arm and took the lead. We followed the trampled path made and kept by us through the jungle until we stared over into the flowing ravine from the large dirt cliff side. Our swinging vine hung idly to the side, tempting my hands to callus against the roughness of the bark and cast me over the side of the embankment if only for a moment. I stared at the trailing plant for a minute yet decided against it. We had a bigger adventure to embark on.

We carefully made our way down the cliff with the help of the swinging rope, mimicking the Indiana Jones movie we had watched with our Dad on the floor at his new apartment. It was part of the “getting used to” that he said we needed to practice.

“You’ll never see how good this move could be until you try.” He would tell us, setting down a platter of pizza rolls on the carpet in the room with no couch, giving us a reassuring grin against our perpetual anxious stomach aches.

“Look!” I exclaimed to Mira, who had just jumped the last bit from the wall of cascading dirt to solid ground. Knees pressed into the

wet shore, I brought my face closer to the dark river water. “It looks like a blue lobster!”

Mira copied my stance and peered with me. On the sandy bank, a light blue creature sat still. Mira dipped their hand into the water, hovering above the crawfish, but I pulled it out frantically.

“Do you know what Mom will do to us if I let you get bit by a blue lobster?” I shrieked. My mother's ominous instructions played through my head like a recording: “If you or Mira get hurt out there in the woods, that’s it for playing outside. I can’t do everything by myself now. You have to take more responsibility”

Mira dried their hand off on their shirt, and we crossed the river with a short jump.

We could see the railroad tracks through the trees even from our house, so the walk to get there was not far. However, walking to the tracks was extremely forbidden. “What happens if a train sees you?” My mom would warn. “They might stop and pick you up. Then where would you be?”

Though, when you’re eight, taking care of your six-year-old sibling, and your parents have recently separated, the idea of being kidnapped by a mysterious train starts to become more appealing than the lopsided house that didn’t feel like home anymore.

Mira and I made our way through the tree line until the blinding white rocks declared we had arrived. The train tracks sat motionless and daunting against the short hill of polished stones. Climbing quickly, we stood on the tracks, defiant, as if we were imploring horrors to come challenge us.

“Look at this!” Mira exclaimed, holding up a long steel nail. It was heavy when I took the object from them, flakes of rust falling into my hand as I admired its structure. It was a piece of the place we dared to go to together. How rebellious!

Suddenly though, the railroad tracks started to shake. An ear-shattering foghorn bellowed through the air and Mira and I scrambled from the hilltop, scraping our knees against the rocks as we tripped, and ripping the flesh from our arms as we sprinted through the dagger ivy into the asylum of tree cover. Pressed against the steaming earth, we lay for an eternity as the train passed us, ignoring the blood that ran down our arms and the stinging of dirt getting into our knee wounds. We waited a few long moments after the train had passed before we got up and dashed from the exposure of the thicket.

“Do you think they saw us?” Mira asked as we sat next to the riverbank, using the murky water to rinse out our injuries. The blue lobster was nowhere to be seen, and I said a silent thank you that the temptation to touch it would be lost. The steel nail sat next to us: the only souvenir we could bring.

“I don’t think so. They would have stopped and stolen us, remember?”

Mira nodded; eyes cast out to where the railroad tracks now sat mute and placed the nail in their pocket. “We can show Dad next time we’re there.” They stated, and we both counted the days in our heads before he would come pick us up again.

Reluctantly, we got up from the riverbank and trudged back up to solid ground. The white house was mere feet from the relief of the forest, yet neither of us made a move to go inside. Our knees rubbed red and the

claw marks on our arms stung with the thought of having to face the truth of the home inside: half empty and missing our Dad.

“I think I need a treat before we go in.” I sighed, looking over at Mira. They nodded without looking over at me. In some way, the feeling of not belonging anywhere anymore was mirroring inside of us, spilling out of a plastic pot and rooting in our stomachs. What was supposed to grow there now?

Silently, we walked towards my uncle's property. The orange tree towered above us, its green leaves glinting in the setting sunlight. Balancing on tippy toes, I reached up and plucked a dirty orange from the confines of its stem and handed it to Mira, then grabbed another one for myself. We stood there for a few minutes, peeling the fruit with our grimy fingernails, savoring the sweetish-sour juice that dripped down our faces. Once we were done, we hurled the empty remnants of the oranges out into the distance, aiming for the treetops that covered the ravine