

## ***The Orange***

It is 1938. We have a girl, sitting at her window, in the cold of morning. So much is about to happen.

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On the morning of her marriage, Esther ate an orange. Her mother had picked it, the first of the season. She promised Esther it would be the best thing she would taste that winter. As a child, Esther thought oranges were small suns, glinting through the orchard, pressing into the fog to clear the way to the dairy. That wedding morning her mother had brought the sun to her, and she ate it in bed, a treat beyond decadence. Later, thinking back on that moment, she realised this gift wasn't a gift after all, but an expiatory offering, mother guilt dripping like juice.

Next to her, Clarise began to stir. They had shared a bed for almost sixteen years, every night since Esther's birth. And then Clarise had left for the City. Now back for the wedding, Clarise had reclaimed her side of the bed and slept so soundly Esther had thought perhaps she was dead. A wedding *and* a funeral Esther had thought when the pre-dawn cold had woken her, and she stared into the darkness, longing for its endurance. All her life she would remember that pushing cold darkness.

Keen to avoid Clarise's early-morning nastiness, Esther got out of bed. It was so cold during the night Clarise and Esther had laid their jumpers and coats over their blankets – even the precious red wool coat that Clarise was wearing yesterday when she got off the train from the City. Esther had almost cried when she saw the coat; the Clarise she once knew was now gone to somewhere Esther knew she could never venture. And the brazen red! Esther had felt nervous and alarmed when she saw the colour and knew Clarise was taunting their mother. As expected, their mother slapped Clarise the moment she got off the train. The unrest begun on the

platform trailed them home and had stayed in the house, clinging to the cold damp air.

Wrenching her dressing gown from under Clarise, Esther pulled back the curtains and sat on the end of the bed to look out the window. Generous as always, the window allowed Esther a moment of clarity. She could see the distant dairy through the hibiscus, and the distorted outline of her brother working there. A familiar camellia pressed up against part of the window, its waxy shiny leaves protecting the last of the winter blooms. Moving to the water bowl, her mother having just filled it with indulgently warm water, Esther washed her sticky hands and splashed her face. She held the handtowel to her eyes for longer than necessary, pushing hard. She would have given a little sob, but didn't. Being dramatic wasn't something Esther was familiar with.

Esther usually felt shy looking at her reflection, but this morning she stared into the dressing table mirror, and for once felt the reflection holding her gaze. She began to brush her hair. 'This is your wedding day,' she whispered to her other self. With each brushstroke, Esther sang a lullaby of words: 'wedding day, day of wedding, wedding, wedding, wedding, wedded, weapon, weeping.'

Clarise groaned, opened her eyes and looked at Esther in the mirror. Smirking, she said 'You forgot whining, windbag Whesther.'

Clarise looked at her younger sister and felt the usual pang of jealousy. Even first thing in the morning, Esther's beauty preceded everything else about her. Her long limbs flailed elegantly, like the singular exotic palm in the front yard. Unlike Clarise's lifeless veneer of flat hair, Esther's was voluminous and, when tamed, her hairline became a precipice, hair ready to fall about her face at any moment. Square-jawed, chin jutting, eyes wide, lashes thick and dark, defiant features flashing every time Clarise teased and tormented her. Esther's high cheek bones framed her beauty. Clarise used to watch Esther as she walked from the dairy to the house, buckets of milk in each hand. She would see Esther's balance and grace, and wonder at how different they were. When Clarise first moved to the City, it was

always late in the afternoons that she felt most homesick. It was then that Esther's beauty became a painting in her mind's eye.

'It's your big day, sweet pea,' Clarise said quietly. Esther turned to look at her, surprised by her sister's gentle tone. Clarise stayed for a moment longer in bed staring at the ceiling, snorting back some morning phlegm, then rolled out of bed into the cold room. She started to quietly sing something about April showers, a tune she had been humming since she had been home. Esther knew it was a song from a picture Clarise had seen in the City – something she confided to Esther only. Going to the pictures was not something Clarise could talk to her mother about, and singing anything other than a hymn in their house was impossible. The only time Esther had been anywhere other than church to hear music was at the local hall, just before Christmas, when Clarise had taken her to a Christmas 'Music Hall' revue. Voices echoed so loudly in the hall, around people in costumes made with newspaper, feed bags, ivy, sticks, flowers, leaves and blankets. Esther had been transfixed. Towards the end of the show, the performers who had been happy and singing onstage began to move to the back of the stage, becoming once again the butcher, farmer, shopkeeper, teacher Esther was familiar with. She imagined herself on stage and felt hot and awkward, almost ashamed by the thought. Esther realised then she would only ever be a backstage person. This was perhaps the most devastating discovery Esther would ever make about herself.

'Oh, for some spring violets, Essie Moo.' Clarise said sadly, as she finally got out of bed and put on Esther's old coat. 'Let me do that,' she said, taking the brush from Esther. Clarise kissed the top of Esther's head and started brushing her sister's thick, long, brown hair, all the while singing quietly about violets and a longed-for spring.

Hair brushed, Clarise poked Esther in the ribs and said 'Come on Fancy Pants, let's get some brekky.' Esther usually had breakfast after milking, but today was a special day and arrangements had been made. As they moved past the window, Esther glanced out to the garden. The strange palm, grown from seed, was a gift from her betrothed to Esther's father. She had been told this many times – the story of the wild drunk soldier man coming to their house and planting the seed with her father. As a child, Clarise would sometimes play at being the drunk Jamesy

Sinclair Saville, weaving and stumbling through the front garden to hug a veranda post and slide down it, crying dramatically. Her father had caught her and smacked her legs, telling her that Jamesy had 'seen the war and more, so stop these shenanigans.' Jamesy had been in her father's life for the past fifty-one years. He had left town when Esther was a baby, just after the palm-seed planting. 'Off shooting roos and rabbits,' her father would sometimes comment. 'And crying and drinking too much to actually kill anything,' Clarise would mumble quietly behind Esther, who would have to move away from her father before she started to laugh. Clarise would sometimes line up Esther with the end of her broom, rifle-style, and say, 'Hold it right there young Rabbit, I'm Sir Jamesy, and you're tomorrow's dinner,' and would hiccup, burp, stumble, salute and fall to the ground.

When Jamesy finally returned to his home farm across the river, because his father was almost gone and his brother dead from a horse, he visited Esther's father. It was a sharp autumn day, clear skies, horizons calling. Esther was coming back from the dairy, wiping her hands on the old ill-fitting trousers she was wearing. She noticed this man in the front garden, standing back to look up into the palm. The rest of the unkempt garden passed him by. He was tall, stooped, with greying hair falling across an eye. He wore no hat. His white shirt sparkled, but his trousers were too short. Boots polished, he stood with one hand in his pocket, and at his other side was his rifle, leaning on his hip. Not unusual to see a farmer with a gun, it was the way he gently stroked the butt that took Esther's notice. Her father was on the veranda, and he came into the garden to greet his old friend, with a hand on his arm and talk of the weather. She was surprised when they embraced, the tall man pulling her father in, his large hand flat and pressing between her father's shoulder blades. When all was later revealed, this was the moment Esther would remember most clearly. Moving apart, they observed the palm tree, noting its miracle of thriving in the sandy soil of the West. Her father introduced Jamesy to Esther. He smiled and nodded to her, his gaze a frown, like he was looking over glasses. She saw that he had only a few bottom teeth, but his top ones were straight and white. She was surprised that this was the Jamesy of her and Clarise's childhood games. He wasn't comical, or drunk, or a soldier. Esther, always uncomfortable around men, met him from a distance, and went inside.

When the weather started to change, summer hope long gone, Esther's father arranged for Jamesy to marry his daughter. Her father was dying. With his wife encumbered by too many children, he had to use his best familial asset, his Beauty, to help them survive. Clarise was furious with the arrangement, cursed her father and damned her mother, cried into Esther's hair, and left for the City.

Esther had once been friends with a farm hand, who came every day to help when her father became sick. They made their work like play, smiling at spilt milk and cow noises, racing to fill buckets, the rules of competition unspoken. Clarise had a photograph of them that she always carried with her, the only photo she could quickly find of Esther when she left for the City. The unnamed boy is sombre and gazing at the camera, Esther glancing away, looking towards the boy but also to something out of shot. Their hips are touching. A light beams over their heads, a common glitch in old camera lenses, presenting a vortex to a moment in time, a promise of retreat. 'All those possibilities,' Clarise had thought as she looked at the photo on that first escape train out of town, the tracks humming her away.

After the wedding date had been set, Jamesy had come to the house a few times to see Esther, to try and talk to her. He dressed beautifully, always wearing a suit with a fresh flower in his lapel, but never a hat. He couldn't talk to Esther, muted by her presence, but they would walk through the paddocks and around the town, puddles from April showers dampening their shoes. Esther would walk next to him, keeping up with his long strides, feeling calmed by his presence, her mind ruminating on her future with such an old person.

That wedding morning, Esther and Clarise moved to the kitchen, its warmth like a gift. They ate their porridge, served to them by their silent mother. She hadn't spoken to Clarise since her return from the City, and Clarise had already made several rude faces behind her mother's back. Their father was still sleeping. Esther's

mother had already sprinkled a generous amount of sugar on Esther's porridge, and they both watched as Clarise put salt on hers, then cream.

'Watch that, young Miss,' their mother said to Clarise, 'you need to fit into that bridesmaid's dress.' Clarise put down her spoon, took up the floral cream jug and poured some more cream onto her porridge. Her bowl was near to overflowing, the cream sinking in the middle, pushing the grey porridge lumps to the rim.

'And you, Mavis, best watch you don't choke on the arsenic I put in your tea earlier.'

Calling Mum by her first name was always a gamble. Esther never did it, but she watched her mother smile and flick her tea-towel at Clarise. Esther smiled too, relieved that the small war currently raging in the house was over for now. 'You need to move it girls, if we're going to get these sandwiches made,' their mother said. 'Don't rip your nighty,' Clarise replied, pouring herself some tea, languidly picking up the teacup and swinging it towards her mother, as if to cheers her. 'Can't a girl finish breakfast on her wedding day?'

Mavis turned back to the wood stove, porridge pot in hand, and said 'Esther can take as long as she wants, MISS Clarise. It's her day, not yours.' Clarise, both elbows on the table, gripped her cup with both hands. Moving it to her mouth, she blew sharply on the hot tea. 'Hardly a day to look forward to Mum,' she said sadly. And neither of the three had anything else to say to that.

Esther moved her porridge around her plate, the spoon limp in her hand. She wasn't hungry. It was only yesterday that Clarise had arrived but it felt like she had never left, their breakfast rituals were so established, so strong and familiar. She thought again about the silent and distant Jamesy. Yesterday, before they had met Clarise's train, he had come over to see her. Returning from the dairy, buckets in hand, she had been looking far beyond the house, into the grey winter skies, her hair volcanic around her face, when she saw Jamesy at the front door. She watched as he turned to see her. She stopped, put down a bucket and went to wave. He had eyed her with a sniper's stare, mesmerising her. Then turned and left her father's farm.

Esther gathered the everyday-china porridge bowls and took them to the sink to wash. 'This is my last morning looking out this window,' Esther thought, wondering what view Jamesy's kitchen sink window would give her tomorrow. She knew there would be a window, and a sink, and that she would be standing at it; that was the way of things. Wiping her hands, she went towards the wood stove, where her best dress was hung for warming on her only padded satin hanger. She dressed quickly. A morning wedding had been arranged so the ceremony would be over in time for morning tea, with the whole celebration finished by afternoon milking.

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So, that morning, rather long ago, we have a girl, Esther, dressed and ready for a wedding. Even her sister Clarise, always running late, is ready to leave. Both sit, waiting, for the start of another life.

Then someone is knocking at the front door.

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Esther would later recall the sound as an image, like a capsule of light coming towards her. It rolled down the dark hallway, like an errant orange falling out of a barrel, slowing to a stop at her feet. It brought the message. There was the sound of the click-tap of Clarise's fancy shoes on the floorboards as she went to the door, the house Morse-coding a warning. Jamesy is dead, by his own gun. They had found him slumped at his front door as they tried to push their way into his childhood home.

Esther sat and watched as her mother uncovered the wedding feast and took it to their church across from the dairy, one plate at a time, sandwiches curling at the edges. All remnants of festivities were swept away, the lace tablecloth folded. Returning the good china to a neighbour, Esther saw her father in the shed, crying, the heel of his hand pulling up his forehead, smoothing out the oldness.

Clarise told her later, much later, their father had loved Jamesy more than all of them, even their mother. Her voice had been quiet, distant, like a last, unexpected note at the end of a song. A perfectly timed full stop. The afternoon when she first met Jamesy returned to Esther so clearly then – Jamesy’s face in her father’s neck, breathing in deeply and lingering a moment too long, the wilting Edwardian garden around them unable to hide this intimate moment.

And at unexpected moments through the rest of her life, Esther would think of Jamesy slumped at his front door, dressed in his wedding attire, Geraldton Wax blooms in his lapel. Blood oozing like sap into his sharp white shirt, the bullet hole under his chin seeping slowly into his collar.

When Clarise and Esther left a few days later for the City, a town of gossip and scrutiny behind them, Esther was exhausted and quiet on the train. They both knew they were ascending into the new. Clarise reached for her. ‘He did it for you, you know Esther?’ Clarise said. ‘He gifted you an orange when you were expecting an apple. He gave you segments for your life, instead of one big sameness.’

Over time Esther realised what she meant, as her black-and-white life turned technicolour, moved from revue to reel. She would move through each part of her life seeking the essence of freshness, seeds of renewal. Her first job and first days with Clarise in Fremantle, the war days over East, good and bad marriages, the affairs. Her children and grandchildren who were various incarnations of herself – seeds of hope, others of despair.

Taking each segment, throwing back her head to tame the juice from running down her chin, Esther inhaled her gifted orange, until there was nothing left, except the peel and dried pith, discarded and diminished on the side of the road.