

Katherine Xiang

“Requiem for an Orange”

*Hey Orange, she began. This was one of those in-head conversations. Remember when you said you'd take me on a one way trip to the moon? You were the lovely strum of a harp. And I. She crawled back into bed. I am the lonely to-be-forgotten mother. What are you doing now? You still show up in my dreams you know. I wake up in cold sweats, walk to the kitchen barefoot to see if you are there. You aren't of course, but I can't help and check. Because it just feels so real. So, do you think of me?*

In the middle of a thousand and one apartment buildings, a lady named Salt turned her face to the other side of the pillow, where a second puddle was starting to grow. She knew that an emptiness was ever-growing in the corners of her home; that even dust bunnies scattered to hide under her bed, which is why she positioned herself right in the center of the mattress. Glass prisms stood in a line on her shelf. They were going to make a color show during sunrise, but currently, it was the limbo of the blue dawn. Despite trying to pleasure herself, Salt couldn't find a way to be calm. With arms wrapped around her body, she hummed a lullaby that sounded like elevator music, and caressed herself to sleep.

When glimpses of rainbows projected on her walls, she got out of bed and roamed around the living room. A compilation of forest ambiance played from her computer. Sure, it was only an imitation, but it was an effective escape and that was kind of a luxury these days. Salt poured the corn cereal she had been having every morning. Today, the spoon was having trouble finding its way in her mouth-mouth. It tried to fit in the mouth on her head, the mouth on the side of her shoulder and by the end of breakfast there was white goop dripping over her hair and clothes. It wasn't like Salt had the appetite anyways. She simply wet-wiped the mess away and went to do the dishes. On her porch, baby birds were chatting; they seemed to have a lot to say about her music taste. Salt had been feeling a bit better from last night, but watching the babies reminded her of her own, and reminded her that her seat on the windowsill remained empty.

She was stalling to go to work by staring at the soap bubbles in the sink. She did not want to open up those Maya files and figure out how to correct all the mistakes in Erin's models. Salt was in charge of lighting scenes; it made the most sense to her. But when Erin chose textures that

interfered with her idea of a cohesive look, this was usually where hours ran overtime. Their game design team was a small group of four. They were a cluster of cubicles that passed work to each other in a clockwise direction. Mark to Erin, Erin to Salt, Salt to Pepper. Just kidding. Salt to Melody, who wrapped up the presentations and submitted them to their supervisor.

To be fair, they were a pretty good team. Right before a deadline, their combined caffeine-fueled, dry eyed, hunch-back energy warded off any and all distractions. Each felt considerate, liable even of the other members and they churned like a well-oiled train. Their nearest deadline was coming up in late February, which wasn't a lot of time at all. Salt thought about their train. And how good it could feel during the last spurt to ride down the mountain, right into the lake of champagne and completion.

So there she sat, in her cube just like the day before as if she had never left. Salt didn't mean to be, but she was actually early. Soon enough, another one of the engine parts rolled in and placed her hat on the rack, but it fell off immediately. And as she reached to put it back, another would decide to fall. It was a nasty trick those hats were playing on her. "Here let me help." Salt slid into frame next to her, and stacked all the hats on top of each other. Blue hats, floppy hats, suede hats, sad hats. And although sparse, the happy ones too.

"You're early," Melody said. "If I had known I would've come earlier." She gave a chuckle, then stopped abruptly, and walked right to her cubicle. For whatever reason, Salt found her endearing.

"Dude, that was weeks ago. She's literally fine." The conductor in stilettos and her throttle strode in through the doorway. "Mornin' Salt. Mark still won't shut up about your house."

"I just think you should've reported it to the police! What if they're still in the neighborhood? You know I live just down the block Salt. Did you even consider me? Are we not friends?" He flung his bag on the chair, sending it rolling down the room.

"Oh, would you sit down already!" And he listened. Salt and Melody exchanged a glance over their divider, knowing that it was their banter that kept the office alive.

There had been an occurrence at Salt's house early November. The local newspaper called it a robbery, but she felt that they were running low of stories to cover that week. Salt called home

insurance and sent pictures of the broken window in her kitchen. She told them good evening, that she lived on the 4th floor, and that she didn't know what happened or what to do.

"Ma'am, I'm going to need you to give me a list of what was taken, and their estimated values."

"Um. Well they took my Orange."

"Your orange?"

"Yes, she is my citrus child. And I- I don't think I can place a value on her."

"Listen. Please don't waste our time." He said calmly and hung up.

Fine. So no one was on her side. So she had to do this on her own. Salt flipped her home upside down for the slim chance that it wasn't true. The strangest thing was that she found nothing else had been tampered. She didn't understand what kind of thief targeted innocent plants on windowsills. Salt looked in the cabinets, behind the television, under the carpet. Then she felt a gritty texture underneath her slippers. She slid her feet some more over the area and noticed a trail of soil leading to the front door. When she opened the door, the trail continued down the stairs and Salt followed the crumbs in a trance. She stopped where it stopped, and had reached at the bus stop. There Orange was, in her ceramic pot, sitting on the metal bench like a miracle come true. Salt tried to see if anyone had been lingering around, but there was only an elderly man dozing off in the seat right over. She tapped his shoulder and he jolted awake only to board the B13 that had just pulled up to the stop. He turned around and gave a smile, "Thank you, young lady."

"Getting on?" The bus driver asked.

She shook her head "No, no sir."

The elderly man waved at her with his cane from the back of the bus.

"You got me so worried," Salt sighed. She carried her heavy baby back up the stairs, thinking that everything would be okay after all.

Things weren't quite the same since that day. Though not immediately noticeable, Orange's fruit had not grown past the same size of a golf ball. Her leaves had started turning yellow on their undersides. One or two completely wilted and had fallen off. Somewhere in the dirt, an

underlying seed of guilt began to grow. “My dear, what do you need? Tell me what you need.” Salt pleaded. She threw her hands up in defeat and lay her head on the counter. *Bzzz*, she mused. *Today I am a bee, making my way around a field of daisies. Today, I know which one to choose.* Her eyes had seen it all along the first day they met. The supple sprout of a newborn in a plastic container. She remembered that the florist told her it wasn’t even part of the inventory yet. Apparently, it was dropped off in their mailbox the night before.

“We think it’s an orange plant, but if citrus is where you’re looking, I can show you our adolescent clementine-.”

“Orange. I’ll take her,” she had stated.

Salt put it upon herself to be more diligent in finding sun in the house for Orange to bathe in. She moved her into a more spacious pot, and set alarms on her phone to water her on time. But none of it seemed to help. Despite having drainage, Salt noticed that the soil was always damp and water had even begun pooling on top. For days, she finished work early, rushing home to read in on horticulture books and online forums. The information she found was never specific enough for her case. By the end of the week, she was driving across the bridge, Orange buckled safely in the back seat. They headed towards the address of a farm upstate referred to her after their appointment with The Plant Doctor. Salt took her chances with him despite seeing only two ratings on Yelp. One outstanding, the other terrible.

“Do you really think your house was robbed?” he asked. “Now believe me, I don’t mess with the supernatural here, but it looks pretty clear to me. She’s outgrown you.”

His words continued to sink in for what seemed like eternity. When rows of healthy orchards came into view, they had reached the drop-off. Salt sat still, thinking that she would step out at any second now, now, now. And in the rear view mirror, the back doors opened on their own first. It was really happening.

She cradled her child step by step to the house behind the gate, and set her down in the front yard. “Grow well, my love,” she whispered and started home without turning back once.

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On a Saturday night, Salt put on blush for the first time in a while. Melody had asked her out on a date counterclockwise through her work email. She said yes. It was incredibly romantic. She felt new, maybe even excited flipping through the fancy section of her wardrobe.

Salt sat on the bed to put on her boots, and though she was supposed to stand up and walk out the door, though it would have been the easiest thing, Salt did the opposite. Like the electrician had pulled a plug in her, she curled into the smallest ball and rocked herself numb. Twice, her sheets vibrated and she let Melody's call go to voicemail. She didn't want to be touched. This was the exact type of responsibility she could never follow through with. How easy it was for those she loved to come and go, it was useless to want to try again. Starting at the hairs on her arm, a certain humidity frizzled in silence, making its way across her pores layer by layer. Salt couldn't take it anymore and she fled the house. She went for the streets alone. There was no plan, she just needed to feel something else. The roads were mostly unoccupied, as if making way just for her, for she was going to dance! Her fanciest dress wisped in waves around her ankles, chiffon almost kissing the floor but never actually touching. Salt twirled through the claustrophobic road, leaning on a kick that pounded in her chest. Her very own rhythmical heartache. Salt didn't realize that she had a sparse audience, shy heads were peaking from behind curtains. Perhaps the rumbling had touched their floors as well. Perhaps one of them was Mark, who felt fondly of his co-worker despite it all.

In a whirl of darkness, a bright vehicle knocked against her body and she spun once before falling to the pavement. Salt placed her hand over the pain on her elbow. The car had headlights resembling a giant cat's eyes, illuminating bits of fur that fell like snow. From the vehicle stepped out a man in a white gown. Normally, she might have scuttled away. But tonight didn't feel quite normal.

"You wanna be free, girl?" he spoke.

*I guess I do*, thought Salt. She could not make out his face no matter how hard she tried.

"I see you, I hear you." His voice came out strangled, which gave her a fright. But now she was involved, she couldn't just turn away. He stretched his arm out to help her up.

"This is what you're gonna do alright? You're gonna go to that bridge there... see? And then it's gonna rain, but don't you be afraid 'kay? You've gotta be one. Feel it, and be one with the rain."

She saw that his eyelids had been moving frivolously; squinting so that the rest of the world refracted around the center of his pupil. Salt could feel that her intestines were warping as well, curving inwards; her back the most bent it had ever been, and a searing pain burst from her spine.

“Stop that!” She screamed and smacked his head to which he immediately coiled back. They both seemed to be in shock from her actions, but Salt had already taken off, running as far as she could from him. “That’s how you’re gonna be free!” His breath trailed right behind her ears. She was indeed headed in the direction of the bridge. And before she knew it, droplets were indeed upon her hands and feet. And like she was the massive highway, she stretched to meet each of them. Her legs carried her automatically, blood pumped on its own until she stood at the center of the metal beast.

Underneath, the ocean was swirling black. Salt knew that she had to dissolve in it to truly become one with the rain. But she hesitated because the sea was bigger than she had imagined. She held tightly onto the gate separating them, for life and the storm poured to protect the energy Salt no longer had to give. In the universe’s own way, the rain became Salt instead and let her sadness be carried by the tides. While crumbling, she shared her location. And Melody’s sedan came to pick her up.

“My goodness Salt! What on earth is going on?”

“I was dancing, there was this man in a car, that was a big cat I think, and I thought I really thought I was going to become the rain but I couldn’t do it,”

She cried harder because it all sounded so foolish, but there was no other explanation coming to mind. “I’m sorry.”

Though Melody had no reason to, she told her that she believed her. She held Salt close, letting her tears adorn her hair. Salt was just a fragile human. And so was Melody, but when two fragile beings are put together, one of them becomes stronger for the other. That’s how it is.

“Let’s get you home.” To the ticking of the turn signal, Salt let herself warm up, like a roasting chestnut on Christmas Eve. In the most unnatural way, things felt so normal; sitting next to someone who had showed up.

“What’s that?” She pointed to the paper bag on the ground between them.

“Those? I picked them up at the farmer’s market this morning. Did you know Erin’s family own a fruit farm?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, her uncle was telling me how he had been plucking the plum trees and realized something odd. Turns out all this time, one of them was a grapefruit tree! Life has its mysterious beauties.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Anyways they’re really sweet, you should try one.”

She fumbled to hand one to Salt, who held its dimpled familiarity in her palms. Peeling into its skin, it was a magnificent ruby-red.

“Thank you...” she read.

“Oh, that’s no problem.”

“...for letting me go.”

“Hmm?”

“Look, there’s a note behind the receipt. It says *thank you for letting me go.*”

“Funny. Wonder what that’s about.”

And the other smiled because she knew.