

Una Media Naranja (A half-peeled orange)

By Denis Casey
(www.deniscasey.com)

[Originally published in the *Blue Nib* (now defunct) in 2020]

The swan glided with arched wings toward the stained wooden decking. A scattering of stale crusts lured it from the lily pads and it stayed as long as the toddler and his grandmother had bread to cast.

Two mothers stood close, on their phones, and children in the play area chased each other between swings and spring horses. On this side a man in his late twenties placed a Seville orange on a paper napkin next to him. Slumped. And waited.

‘Hey,’ she said.

‘Hi... you’re back?’ He didn’t get up.

‘Yeah.’ She sat on the edge of the bench, twisting toward him and crossing her legs. ‘It’s cold for so late in the spring.’

‘Yeah.’

‘They were nice at the clinic.’ She paused. ‘And quick.’

‘Guess that’s the way when you know what you’re doing.’

‘Yeah. I don’t really want to talk about it.’

He picked the orange and chose a dimple. He pressed his thumb in and broke the skin. ‘Guess that’s the way,’ he said to the pond.

‘The taxi driver at the airport seemed to know where I was going when I asked for the hotel.

Guess I wasn’t the first he’s seen.’

‘I didn’t want that.’

‘I don’t want it either.’

He ran his thumbnail down the length of the orange prising the skin from the centre. As each piece broke away, the next followed, easier and easier. It took little time to lay it bare.

‘Yeah.’ He focused on the empty swings.

‘Oh, for God’s sake! Can’t you say something more than *Yeah?*’

‘Well what do you want me to say? You said you didn’t want to talk.’

‘I said I didn’t want to talk about it.’

They sat in silence. He laid the last strips of skin on the napkin between them.

‘Your mum rang to see how I was,’ she finally offered.

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah. She was nice. You weren’t talking to her?’

‘She didn’t call.’

‘You could’ve called her.’

‘I suppose. But I didn’t have anything to say.’

‘She’s your Mum. You could just call to see how she’s doing and maybe if she’s anything to say.’

‘If she had something to say she would have called.’

‘Sometimes... sometimes it’s not that easy even when you have something to say.’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

One-by-one he teased out the frayed strands of pith, careful not to break into the tender flesh.

He laid them on the broke skin pile. A faint aroma like Curaçao clung to his fingers.

‘I loved the orange trees in my *abuela*’s garden when I was a kid, even after I fell and cut my thigh deep and the blood ran...’

‘Ran like...?’ he pressed.

She hugged her belly. Twisted her legs away from him. ‘We could go away for a bit. A weekend break might be nice?’

‘Another hotel?’

‘Or we could go back to my grandparent’s place in Spain. The south is really nice in spring before it gets too hot.’

‘Yeah. It’s nice,’

‘The oranges will have finished blossoming by now, but you can still smell them in the mornings.’

‘I don’t care for flowers.’

‘You don’t care about anything.’

He turned to her with narrowing eyes. ‘That’s not true and you know it. I care and I care too bloody much or else we wouldn’t be sitting on this fucking bench. And...’

‘You didn’t care enough to come with me!’

‘Oh, don’t turn it around on me. You know I couldn’t. Because I cared. And I begged you not to go...’

‘It’s not your choice.’

‘Clearly not. Clearly nothing is.’

‘It was different on the marches. It was all fine then. I guess it’s ok when it’s just an idea and a badge to stick on a bag.’

‘That was different...’

‘Yeah... That was different.’

From the play area the sound of isolated wailing broke through. One of the mothers finished texting as she walked toward a child slumped at the base of the swings. She lifted him and brushed down the worst of the stains with her hands.

The couple on the bench gazed vacantly across at them.

‘Don’t be like that. Can’t we just... can’t we ... oh fuck it. I don’t know.’ She lowered her head to her hands.

When she looked up, he was no longer with her.

The swan dipped its neck into the roots of the lily pads. The cygnets floated aimlessly. He’d walked toward them, leaving a perfectly peeled half orange on the bench.

Bio

Denis Casey is a medieval historian who teaches academic writing at Maynooth University. Career highlights include collaborating with the Oscar-nominated Cartoon Saloon on the *Emperor of the Irish* exhibition (2014), where some Vikings looked like the Cookie Monster. His next project is a historical fiction set on the Camino de Santiago.