Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit

Jeanette Winterson

For Gill Saunders and Fang the Cat

`When thick rinds are used the top must be thoroughly skimmed, or a scum will form marring the final appearence.'

—From *The Making of Marmalade* by Mrs Beeton

`Oranges are not the only fruit'

—Nell Gwynn

Genesis

Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn't matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that.

She hung out the largest sheets on the windiest days. She *wanted* the Mormons to knock on the door. At election time in a Labour mill town she put a picture of the Conservative candidate in the window.

She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies.

Enemies were:

- The Devil (in his many forms)
- Next Door
- Sex (in its many forms)
- Slugs

Friends were:

- God
- Our dog
- Auntie Madge
- The Novels of Charlotte Brontë
- Slug pellets

and me, at first. I had been brought in to join her in a tag match against the Rest of the World. She had a mysterious attitude towards the begetting of children; it wasn't that she couldn't do it, more that she didn't want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. That was me.

I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special. We had no Wise Men because she didn't believe there were any wise men, but we had sheep. One of my earliest memories is me sitting on a sheep at Easter while she told me the story of the Sacrificial Lamb. We had it on Sundays with potato.

Sunday was the Lord's day, the most vigorous day of the whole week; we had a radiogram at home with an imposing mahogany front and a fat Bakelite knob to twiddle for the stations. Usually we listened to the Light Programme, but on Sundays always the World Service, so that my mother could record the progress of our missionaries. Our Missionary Map was very fine. On the front were all the countries and on the back a number chart that told you about Tribes and their Peculiarities. My favourite was Number 16, *The Buzule of Carpathian*. They believed that if a mouse found your hair clippings and built a nest with them you got a headache. If the nest was big enough, you might go mad. As far as I knew no missionary had yet visited them.

My mother got up early on Sundays and allowed no one into the parlour until ten o'clock. It was her place of prayer and meditation. She always prayed standing up, because of her knees, just as Bonaparte always gave orders from his horse, because of his size. I do think that the relationship my mother enjoyed with God had a lot to do with positioning. She was Old Testament through and through. Not for her the meek and paschal Lamb, she was out there, up front with the prophets, and much given to sulking under trees when the appropriate destruction didn't materialise. Quite often it did, her will or the Lord's I can't say.

She always prayed in exactly the same way. First of all she thanked God that she had lived to see another day, and then she thanked God for sparing the world another day. Then she spoke of her enemies, which was the nearest thing to she had to a catechism.

As soon as `Vengeance is mine saith the Lord' boomed through the wall into the kitchen, I put the kettle on. The time it took to boil the water and brew the tea was just about the length of her final item, the sick list. She was very regular. I put the milk in, in she came, and taking a great gulp of tea said one of three things.

`The Lord is good' (steely-eyed into the back yard).

`What sort of tea is this?' (steely-eyed at me).

`Who was the oldest man in the Bible?'

No. 3, of course, had a number of variations, but it was always a Bible quiz question. We had a lot of

Bible quizzes at church and my mother liked me to win. If I knew the answer she asked me another, if I didn't she got cross, but luckily not for long, because we had to listen to the World Service. It was always the same; we sat down on either side of the radiogram, she with her tea, me with a pad and pencil; in front of us, the Missionary Map. The faraway voice in the middle of the set gave news of activities, converts and problems. At the end there was an appeal for YOUR PRAYERS. I had to write it all down so that my mother could deliver her church report that night. She was the Missionary Secretary. The Missionary Report was a great trial to me because our mid-day meal depended upon it. If it went well, no deaths and lots of converts, my mother cooked a joint. If the Godless had proved not only stubborn, but murderous, my mother spent the rest of the morning listening to the Jim Reeves Devotional Selection, and we had to have boiled eggs and toast soldiers. Her husband was an easy-going man, but I knew it depressed him. He would have cooked it himself but for my mother's complete conviction that she was the only person in our house who could tell a saucepan from a piano. She was wrong, as far as we were concerned, but right as far as she was concerned, and really, that's what mattered.

Somehow we got through those mornings, and in the afternoon she and I took the dog for a walk, while my father cleaned all the shoes. `You can tell someone by their shoes,' my mother said. `Look at Next Door.'

`Drink,' said my mother grimly as we stepped out past their house. `That's why they buy everything from Maxi Ball's Catalogue Seconds. The Devil himself is a drunk' (sometimes my mother invented theology).

Maxi Ball owned a warehouse, his clothes were cheap but they didn't last, and they smelt of industrial glue. The desperate, the careless, the poorest, vied with one another on a Saturday morning to pick up what they could, and haggle over the price. My mother would rather not eat than be seen at Maxi Ball's. She had filled me with a horror of the place. Since so many people we knew went there, it was hardly fair of her but she never was particularly fair; she loved and she hated, and she hated Maxi Ball. Once, in winter, she had been forced to go there to buy a corset and in the middle of communion, that very Sunday, a piece of whalebone slipped out and stabbed her right in the stomach. There was nothing she could do for an hour. When we got home she tore up the corset and used the whalebone as supports for our geraniums, except for one piece that she gave to me. I still have it, and whenever I'm tempted to cut corners I think about that whalebone, and I know better.

My mother and I walked on towards the hill that stood at the top of our street. We lived in a town stolen from the valleys, a huddled place full of chimneys and little shops and back-to-back houses with no gardens. The hills surrounded us, and our own swept out into the Pennines, broken now and again with a farm or a relic from the war. There used to be a lot of old tanks but the council took them away. The town was a fat blot and the streets spread back from it into the green, steadily upwards. Our house was almost at the top of a long, stretchy street. A flagged street with a cobbly road. When you climb to the top of the hill and look down you can see everything, just like Jesus on the pinnacle except it's not very tempting. Over to the right was the viaduct and behind the viaduct Ellison's tenement, where we had the fair once a year. I was allowed to go there on condition I brought back a tub of black peas for my mother. Black peas look like rabbit droppings and they come in a thin gravy made of stock and gypsy

mush. They taste wonderful. The gypsies made a mess and stayed up all night and my mother called them fornicators but on the whole we got on very well. They turned a blind eye to toffee apples going missing, and sometimes, if it was quiet and you didn't have enough money, they still let you have a ride on the dodgems. We used to have fights round the caravans, the ones like me, from the street, against the posh ones from the Avenue. The posh ones went to Brownies and didn't stay for school dinners.

Once, when I was collecting the black peas, about to go home, the old woman got hold of my hand. I thought she was going to bite me. She looked at my palm and laughed a bit. `You'll never marry,' she said, `not you, and you'll never be still.' She didn't take any money for the peas, and she told me to run home fast. I ran and ran, trying to understand what she meant. I hadn't thought about getting married anyway. There were two women I knew who didn't have husbands at all; they were old though, as old as my mother. They ran the paper shop and sometimes, on a Wednesday, they gave me a banana bar with my comic. I liked them a lot, and talked about them a lot to my mother. One day they asked me if I'd like to go to the seaside with them. I ran home, gabbled it out, and was busy emptying my money box to buy a new spade, when my mother said firmly and forever, no. I couldn't understand why not, and she wouldn't explain. She didn't even let me go back to say I couldn't. Then she cancelled my comic and told me to collect it from another shop, further away. I was sorry about that. I never got a banana bar from Grimsby's. A couple of weeks later I heard her telling Mrs White about it. She said they dealt in unnatural passions. I thought she meant they put chemicals in their sweets.

My mother and I climbed and climbed until the town fell away and we reached the memorial stone at the very top. The wind was always strong so that my mother had to wear extra hat pins. Usually she wore a headscarf, but not on Sunday. We sat on the stone's base and she thanked the Lord we had managed the ascent. Then she extemporised on the nature of the world, the folly of its peoples, and the wrath of God inevitable. After that she told me a story about a brave person who had despised the fruits of the flesh and worked for the Lord instead….

There was the story of the `converted sweep', a filthy degenerate, given to drunkenness and vice, who suddenly found the Lord whilst scraping the insides of a flue. He remained in the flue in a state of rapture for so long that his friends thought he was unconscious. After a great deal of difficulty they persuaded him to come out; his face, they declared, though hardly visible for the grime, shone like an angel's. He started to lead the Sunday School and died some time later, bound for glory. There were many more; I particularly like the `Hallelujah Giant', a freak of nature, eight feet tall shrunk to six foot three through the prayers of the faithful.

Now and again my mother liked to tell me her own conversion story; it was very romantic. I sometimes think that if Mills and Boon were at all revivalist in their policy my mother would be a star.

One night, by mistake, she had walked into Pastor Spratt's Glory Crusade. It was in a tent on some spare land, and every evening Pastor Spratt spoke of the fate of the damned, and performed healing miracles. He was very impressive. My mother said he looked like Errol Flynn, but holy. A lot of women found the Lord that week. Part of Pastor Spratt's charisma stemmed from his time spent as an advertising manager

for Rathbone's Wrought Iron. He knew about bait. `There is nothing wrong with bait,' he said, when the *Chronicle* somewhat cynically asked him why he gave pot plants to the newly converted. `We are commanded to be Fishers of Men.' When my mother heard the call, she was presented with a copy of the Psalms and asked to make her choice between a Christmas Cactus (non-flowering) and a lily of the valley. She had opted for the lily of the valley. When my father went the next night, she told him to be sure and go for the cactus, but by the time he got to the front they had all gone. `He's not one to push himself,' she often said, and after a little pause, `Bless him.'

Pastor Spratt came to stay with them for the rest of his time with the Glory Crusade, and it was then that my mother discovered her abiding interest in missionary work. The pastor himself spent most of his time out in the jungle and other hot places converting the Heathen. We have a picture of him surrounded by black men with spears. My mother keeps it by her bed. My mother is very like William Blake; she has visions and dreams and she cannot always distinguish a flea's head from a king. Luckily she can't paint.

She walked out one night and thought of her life and thought of what was possible. She thought of the things she couldn't be. Her uncle had been an actor. `A very fine Hamlet,' said the *Chronicle.*

But the rags and the ribbons turn to years and then the years are gone. Uncle Will had died a pauper, she was not so young these days and people were not kind. She liked to speak French and to play the piano, but what do these things mean?

* * *

Once upon a time there was a brilliant and beautiful princess, so sensitive that the death of a moth could distress her for weeks on end. Her family knew of no solution. Advisers wrung their hands, sages shook their heads, brave kings left unsatisfied. So it happened for many years, until one day, out walking in the forest, the princess came to the hut of an old hunchback who knew the secrets of magic. This ancient creature perceived in the princess a woman of great energy and resourcefulness.

`My dear,' she said, `you are in danger of being burned by your own flame.'

The hunchback told the princess that she was old, and wished to die, but could not because of her many responsibilities. She had in her charge a small village of homely people, to whom she was advisor and friend. Perhaps the princess would like to take over? Her duties would be:

- (1) To milk the goats,
- (2) To educate the people
- (3) To compose songs for their festival

To assist her she would have a three-legged stool and all the books belonging to the hunchback. Best of all, the old woman's harmonium, an instrument of great antiquity and four octaves.

The princess agreed to stay and forgot all about the palace and the moths. The old woman thanked her, and died at once.

* * *

My mother, out walking that night, dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord:

- a missionary child,
- a servant of God,
- a blessing.

And so it was that on a particular day, some time later, she followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child. A child with too much hair.

She said, `This child is mine from the Lord.'

She took the child away and for seven days and seven nights the child cried out, for fear and not knowing. The mother sang to the child, and stabbed the demons. She understood how jealous the Spirit is of flesh.

Such warm tender flesh.

Her flesh now, sprung from her head.

Her vision.

Not the jolt beneath the hip bone, but water and the word.

She had a way out now, for years and years to come.

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We stood on the hill and my mother said, `This world is full of sin.
We stood on the hill and my mother said, `You can change the world.'

*

When we got home my father was watching television. It was the match between `Crusher Williams' and one-eyed Jonney Stott. My mother was furious; we always covered up the television on Sundays. We had a DEEDS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT tablecloth, given to us by a man who did house clearances.

It was very grand, and we kept it in a special drawer with nothing else but a piece of Tiffany glass and some parchment from Lebanon. I don't know why we kept the parchment. We had thought it was a bit of the Old Testament but it was the lease to a sheep farm. My father hadn't even bothered to fold up the cloth, and I could just see `Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments' in a heap under the vertical hold. `There's going to be trouble,' I thought, and announced my intention of going down to the Salvation Army place for a tambourine lesson.

Poor Dad, he was never quite good enough.

That night at church, we had a visiting speaker, Pastor Finch from Stockport. He was an expert in demons, and delivered a terrifying sermon on how easy it is to become demon-possessed. We were all very uneasy afterwards. Mrs White said she thought her next-door neighbours were probably possessed, they had all the signs. Pastor Finch said that the possessed are given to uncontrollable rages, sudden bursts of wild laughter, and are always, always, very cunning. The Devil himself, he reminded us, can come as an angel of light.

After the service we were having a banquet; my mother had made twenty trifles and her usual mound of cheese and onion sandwiches.

`You can always tell a good woman by her sandwiches,' declared Pastor Finch.

My mother blushed.

Then he turned to me and said, `How old are you, little girl?'

`Seven,' I replied.

`Ah, seven,' he muttered. `How blessed, the seven days of creation, the seven-branched candlestick, the seven seals.'

(Seven seals? I had not yet reached Revelation in my directed reading, and I thought he meant some Old Testament amphibians I had overlooked. I spent weeks trying to find them, in case they came up as a quiz question.)

`Yes,' he went on, `how blessed,' then his brow clouded. `But how cursed.' At this word his fist hit the table and catapulted a cheese sandwich into the collection bag; I saw it happen, but I was so distracted I forgot to tell anyone. They found it in there the week after, at the Sisterhood meeting. The whole table had fallen silent, except for Mrs Rothwell who was stone deaf and very hungry.

`The demon can return SEVENFOLD.' His eyes roamed the table. (Scrape, went Mrs Rothwell's spoon.)

`SEVENFOLD.'

('Does anybody want this piece of cake?' asked Mrs Rothwell.)

`The best can become the worst,'—he took me by the hand—'This innocent child, this bloom of the Covenant.'

`Well, I'll eat it then,' announced Mrs Rothwell.

Pastor Finch glared at her, but he wasn't a man to be put off.

`This little lily could herself be a house of demons.'

`Eh, steady on Roy,' said Mrs Finch anxiously.

`Don't interrupt me Grace,' he said firmly, `I mean this by way of example only. God has given me an opportunity and what God has given we must not presume to waste.

`It has been known for the most holy men to be suddenly filled with evil. And how much more a woman, and how much more a child. Parents, watch your children for the signs. Husbands, watch your wives. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'

He let go of my hand, which was now crumpled and soggy.

He wiped his own on his trouser leg.

`You shouldn't tax yourself so, Roy,' said Mrs Finch, `have some trifle, it's got sherry in it.'

I felt a bit awkward to so I went into the Sunday School Room. There was some Fuzzy Felt to make Bible scenes with, and I was just beginning to enjoy a rewrite of Daniel in the lions' den when Pastor Finch appeared. I put my hands into my pockets and looked at the lino.

`Little girl,' he began, then he caught sight of the Fuzzy Felt.

`What's that?'

`Daniel,' I answered.

`But that's not right,' he said, aghast. `Don't you know that Daniel escaped? In your picture the lions are swallowing him.'

`I'm sorry,' I replied, putting on my best, blessed face. `I wanted to do Jonah and the whale, but they

don't do whales in Fuzzy Felt. I'm pretending those lions are whales.'

`You said it was Daniel.' He was suspicious.

`I got mixed up.'

He smiled. `Let's put it right, shall we?' And he carefully rearranged the lions in one corner, and Daniel in the other. `What about Nebuchadnezzar? Let's do the Astonishment at Dawn scene next.' He started to root through the Fuzzy Felt, looking for a king.

`Hopeless,' I thought, Susan Green was sick on the tableau of the three Wise Men at Christmas, and you only get three kings to a box.

I left him to it. When I came back into the hall somebody asked me if I'd seen Pastor Finch.

`He's in the Sunday School Room playing with the Fuzzy Felt,' I replied.

`Don't be fanciful Jeanette,' said the voice. I looked up. It was Miss Jewsbury; she always talked like that, I think it was because she taught the oboe. It does something to your mouth.

`Time to go home,' said my mother. `I think you've had enough excitement for one day.'

It's odd, the things other people think are exciting.

We set off, my mother, Alice and May ('Auntie Alice, Auntie May, to you'). I lagged behind, thinking about Pastor Finch and how horrible he was. His teeth stuck out, and his voice was squeaky, even though he tried to make it deep and stern. Poor Mrs Finch. How did she live with him? Then I remembered the gypsy. `You'll never marry.' That might not be such a bad thing after all. We walked along the Factory Bottoms to get home. The poorest people of all lived there, tied to the mills. There were hundreds of children and scraggy dogs. Next Door used to live down there, right by the glue works, but their cousin or someone had left them a house, next to our house. `The work of the Devil, if ever I saw it,' said my mother, who always believed these things are sent to try us.

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I wasn't allowed in the Factory Bottoms on my own, and that night as the rain began, I was sure I knew why. If the demons lived anywhere it was here. We went past the shop that sold flea collars and poisons. Arkwright's For Vermin it was called; I had been inside it once, when we had a run of cockroaches. Mrs Arkwright was there cashing up; she caught sight of May as we went past and shouted at her to come in. My mother wasn't very pleased, but muttering something about Jesus associating with tax collectors and sinners pushed me inside, in front of them all.

`Where've you been May,' asked Mrs Arkwright, wiping her hand on a dishcloth, `not seen hide of you in a month.'

`I've been in Blackpool.'

`Ho, come in at some money have you?'

`It were at Bingo 'ousie 'ousie three times.'

`No.'

Mrs Arkwright was both admiring and bad-tempered.

The conversation continued like this for some time, Mrs Arkwright complaining that business was poor, that she'd have to close the shop, that there was no money in vermin any more.

`Let's hope we have a hot summer, that'll fetch them out.'

My mother was visibly distressed.

`Remember that heatwave two years ago? Ooo, I did some trade then. Cockroaches, hard backs, rats, you name it, I poisoned it. No, it's not same any more.'

We kept a respectful silence for a moment or two, then my mother coughed and said we should be getting along.

`Here, then,' said Mrs Arkwright, 'tek these furt nipper.' She meant me and, rummaging around somewhere behind the counter, pulled out a few different-shaped tins.

`It can keep its marbles and stuff in 'em,' she explained.

`Ta,' I said and smiled.

`Ey, it's all right that one, you knows,' she smiled at me and, wiping her hand firmly on my hand, let us out of the shop.

`Look at these May.' I held them up.

`Auntie May,' snapped my mother.

May examined them with me.