

*Orange Chocolate* – this is a pair of words that holds a lot of meaning for me. It is such a simple phrase, and yet it conjures up a mottled ragged raft of complicated feelings, of simple things that ought to be simple, but become gnarly through having turned up in the wrong way, much as the words “bean stalk” would not mean anything out of the ordinary to you unless you had somehow had one take root in your ear canal and begin to grow into your head and sprout, and grow, over a period of many years before it was found & removed. The thought of beans, in that case, would be a loaded one for you. In the same way, orange chocolate shouldn’t be a big deal, but for me it was.



I am going to describe a very sensuous experience from when I was young, which sounds racy, but really just means ‘focused on the senses.’ I was in the second, or perhaps the third grade, sitting in a school bus – which, it is essential for you to understand, I hated. It was an unbearable, unholy waste of time to have to ride to and from school every day, especially being very nearly the first kid picked up and the last one dropped off. For a boy who could remember having the Ottawa National Forest in his backyard, having to wait forty-five minutes to get home and play outside was torture of an exquisite kind. So here I was, a skinny egg-headed boy sitting in said hateful school bus. But, all was not lost! And life is seldom wholly unattended by oases of relief. Prominent among mine were my mother’s chocolate chip bars: a chewy, bready, weighty dense kind of pastry which she would bake and pack in my lunches. You could take a bite of one, and let it drop onto your tongue (and this is where the sensuous part comes in) and roll it about a bit, feeling a haze of dry crumbliness around the edges, but in the main a firm, hefty and very contained morsel. It would yield pleasantly to your first chew, whereupon all manner of moist breadiness and mixed dryness would be spread about pleasantly in your mouth, laced all through (I am pleased to imagine) by languid ropes of near-liquid chocolate, which have been loosed from their pockets within the bar, and now twirl about the crumbs and dense chewy dough on your palate. A simple Epicurean pleasure, not only for its taste, but also, I later realized, for its sacred invariability. Chocolate, in a bready, doughy, crumbly texture of pastry, always and forever.

I took enough delight in these chocolate chip bars that they almost seemed to make the bus rides bearable, and I saved them out from my lunches for the purpose. Imagine, then, my alarm when one day I bit into a chocolate chip bar on the bus, fully expecting to be transported to the highest halls of human happiness, and found myself reacting to a wholly alien flavor – a flavor so jarring and moldy-seeming and out of place that at first I did not even recognize it. My first thought was that the bars had been left out too long and had somehow gone bad. My mouth and my young boy’s mind would not give up so easily, however, and soldiered on disbelievably for a few more chews. After a few seconds I recognized the flavor: Orange. A thing to drink at breakfast. A tangy kind of Russian tea we always had at Christmas. A thing to peel unsuccessfully at lunch break and make your fingers sticky, yes. But a thing for a chocolate chip bar?

The first chance I found, I confronted my mother. “Something was wrong with my bars,” I must have said. “They tasted funny, like they went bad or something.” “Yes, well, I put orange peels in them,” was her cheerful response. I was boggled. She hadn’t made a mistake? She had done it on purpose? Somehow thought I would *like* it? I am sure (though I don’t remember) that I questioned her on these points. She seemed to get a kick out of my perplexity, as I recall. “Yes, I just had an idea to put

some orange peels through a grater and put them into the dough!” she said, laughing, as though she might have added “so ha!” At this point my 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade mind was trying to come to grips with the idea that my mother has put what is basically ground-up garbage into my bars, with the apparent intent of having a good laugh at me. “Why would you do that? Why would you ruin a whole batch of bars on purpose?” My mind kept forcing my mouth to work and form the words.

Looking back, I can see how an open-minded, mature, fully-developed person would have been able to recognize the whole thing as an innocent experiment on my mother’s part; and furthermore to see how perhaps my mother got a bit of a lift in her spirits, occasionally, from realizing that she didn’t need her children’s approval for everything she did for them. My mind was not fully developed, however. It was suffering, furthermore, from the daily privations of the bus ride to and from school.

I finally shut up about it and instead internalized my feelings; lacking expression and understanding, they hardened in to a small knot of a few of the worst shades of adolescent emotion: of having been pranked (or at least, of having been made to feel you have been pranked); of being misunderstood and unable to make yourself heard; of being the only one in the room that just couldn’t get the joke; of being vaguely, but highly, suspicious of having *been* the joke. And of course these juices were bonded, with strong ties of association, to one sensation in particular: the alien and now-offensive taste combination of orange and chocolate.

My reactions to even the mention of combined orange and chocolate after this incident did not go unnoticed by my friends and relations. And I noticed that they noticed, and by some self-ossifying process I adopted this prejudice openly as a part of my identity. The reactions were sincere at first, but eventually became, also, part of a performance, a “thing Joel does.” “Look,” one of my sisters would say, “they’re selling orange candy wedges right next to the Milk Duds” and they would watch for my reaction. It was an odd or *unusual* dislike, which I soon became aware was odd and unusual, and soon grew to enjoy explaining, an implement in my slim toolbox of ways to amuse people and get them to find me interesting (or so I imagined).

As time went on, the dislike became more and more hollow. The old, real bite of disappointment was gradually and imperceptibly replaced with deposits of a simple “for-show” prejudice, which was required by the narrative, to extend its lease and lend it, for just a little longer, that quality of frustration which was its pathetic charm for all of us.

An unfortunate thing about these little running performances we inherit from our adolescent selves is that, like an old piece of gum, they soon become lukewarm, flavorless, and rubberized – yet for some reason we just can’t stop chewing. As years wore on, I grew tired of the whole issue of orange chocolate being an issue at all. There came a day when I could no longer muster the expected righteous indignation when Mr President would propose we all get *orange* chocolate in our stockings for Christmas and then watch, not very subtly, for me to blanch in affected and customary distaste.



And then there came a day, months and years later. I was sitting with a bunch of my siblings and friends in our rec room, watching a movie, and a young woman was sitting on the couch in front of me. She had curly blonde hair and an impish laugh, and was sitting and laughing with my younger sister Gwen, and for my part I had come to realize that this girl's heart's-ease and affection were what I desired almost more than anything else in the world. As we watched, she turned to me and offered me a piece of her Christmas chocolate. It was dark chocolate in the shape of an orange, broken into orange-like wedges, and it came in an orange wrapper. I had no doubt that this chocolate was thoroughly infused with orange flavoring. It seemed I could feel the eyes of all my younger siblings watching me, the oldest, at the moment of truth, their eyes ready with judgment in the form of an unspoken question: if you take that slice of orange chocolate, Joel, how are you going to explain to us all those years of deep-seated dread and vocal opposition? It seemed almost a miracle that none of them actually asked the question that would have made my embarrassment obvious and complete.

But love is a beautiful thing. Trixie could have had no idea of what she was asking me, and this was unexpectedly refreshing. It was that, and the power of attraction and a desire to please, I think, that caused me to take the chocolate and put it into my mouth and decide that I liked it. Because really, it tasted good. After I'd done it, and the world hadn't ended, and there had been no guffaws from my brothers (who were probably more intent on the movie than I had realized), I felt better in ways I hadn't expected. Maybe I *could* just finally let go of that batch of orange-peel chocolate chip bars from the second grade, and maybe I could finally drop these last affected, uncomfortable vestiges of my egg-headed boyhood in the process. In addition to the chocolate, Trixie handed me a clean slate – a clean slate with myself as well as with her – and the chance for simple things to be simple again, and I took it gratefully. She still does this every day.

– Joel Dueck

