

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention, Adult Essay Contest

A Tangerine in My Stocking

By Heather Johnson Reid, Bethesda

Some family traditions I have never questioned and have carried on in my own home feeling the thread of commonality with generations before me. The hope and surprise I felt each Christmas morning in my childhood was increased by the sight of a bright orange tangerine resting on top of the lip of my stocking. The stocking, a large stuffed goodie bag in the shape of a sock, was hung on Christmas Eve by me and my three siblings along the wooden molding above the fireplace with birth order represented from left to right, oldest to youngest. It was the only gift we were allowed to investigate before my parents arose. Presents under the tree would be politely doled out later when everyone assembled after breakfast, but the stocking, festooned with that glorious tangerine, was ours for the taking.

The tangerine, or mandarin, has a long history of travel. Ancient fossil records suggest that the citrus genus of a mandarin dates back seven million years ago, originating in the Himalayas before spreading throughout Southeast Asia along to Mediterranean markets. The name tangerine comes from Tangiers in Morocco, the port where the fruit was first shipped to Europe and the United States in the 1800s.

My mother introduced this tradition to us. She grew up along the coast of Connecticut and her stories of family supporting each other during the Great Depression of the 1930s through a lack of jobs, food and money are indelible and a constant reminder that hardships befall every generation. Her father was employed and he and her mother gladly offered other family members food and shelter. Christmas was still a time of joy for all as they were grateful to gather together and share a few extras that might be considered a delicacy. I do not know how the tangerine made its way into the markets where she lived but it was a specialty item offered only during the winter. The hope of the cheerful colored citrus fruit brought her joy during what might have otherwise seemed a bleak period, poignant enough to her that she carried the tradition on throughout my childhood.

Unraveling the peel from my tangerine this year gave me solace in a ritual of my youth, one that I happily still share yearly with my son, now grown, each Christmas. I too can tell the next generation of a time when the world changed with a pandemic and supply shortages. I have lost a loved one to a virus that we had no vaccine for last year, and some do not have access to all they may need. The factors vary differently from the Great Depression, but rituals we keep as hopeful signs of a future of health and joyful gatherings remain part of the human experience.

Each generation can lay claim to challenges. For my mother it was the Depression era, for me the troubles of loss in the age of coronavirus. The thread we continue to weave is sharing traditions, stories and symbols of hope and a bit of joy in the dark times. It is why the sight of an orange tangerine lifts my mood, the smell of the fragrant citrus reminds me of happy days,

and the pulpy fruit in my mouth satisfies more than my dietary needs. It is the essence and reminder that what I choose to share with the next generation may lead to health and joy on the other side of life's challenges.