

Chocolate Oranges

By Kevin Holsopple

Whack!

I had just pulled a chocolate orange from the bottom of my Christmas stocking. My twin brother and I were covered in the wrapping that had once hidden our presents. Our dogs, led by their curious noses, rooted about the paper, sniffing their way around us.

Whack!

I felt the paper wrapping of the orange shift as the wedges separated under the force of the blow. I tore into it, retrieving a half-broken wedge within and shoving it gleefully into my mouth.

Whack!

My brother did the same beside me, pulling out an unbroken wedge. He shoved it in his mouth, positioning it to look like he had chocolate teeth.

I laughed, spewing half-eaten chunks of chocolate onto my lap and the paper around me. My brother laughed as well, and he spit the semi-melted orange slice into his hand.

We both laughed at each other, our faces turning red, and soon our laughter turned to giggling.

Giggling. That was the word our mother would use for my brother and I at play throughout our youth. Two boys giggling at anything and nothing.

To me, that giggling was everything. It meant time spent with my best friend. We played together for hours building Lego creations and imagining whole worlds together. We created epic battle scenes with action figures. When we were older, we defended the earth from alien invasions in the world of video games.

Christmas was the best time of year for us. My brother and I would wake up early, even after hardly sleeping the night before from the anticipation of it all. We'd race to our parents' bedroom and shake them awake as they groggily sat up and wiped sleep from their eyes.

"Merry Christmas!" We would shout together as we raced down the stairs where we'd wait patiently for presents. We both sat cross legged in front of the tree, admiring all the beautifully wrapped gifts and the light of the bulbs glinting off the ornaments.

Our mother never did anything halfway. She took great pride in her ability to decorate our house for Christmas. In addition to our tree, there was garland wrapped around our banisters, snowmen scattered throughout the house, and lights, hundreds of lights, sparkling about the windows. To me, our home might as well have been the north pole.

My brother and I would show each other what we got and talk excitedly about what we would do with the presents later. Our mother and father would smile at us and prod us along if we got stuck on one gift for too long.

After our gifts were opened, our mom and dad would pass us our stockings. Peeking out of the top would be an assortment of candies, but I knew the real prize would always be at the bottom.

The presents were different every year, but the one constant was always that chocolate orange.

When gifts and stockings were done, my brother and I would run off to play. We would take turns choosing what games to play together, always working cooperatively to win.

We carried on like that for years, always together, always inseparable. In middle school, we met our own friends and began to pursue our own interests.

“Want to play Halo?” I asked my brother one day after school.

I had to tap him hard on the shoulder. He had his headphones on and didn’t hear me the first two times I said it.

“No,” he said.

I winced, though I tried not to let on too much that it upset me. It wasn’t the first time he had said no that week. It wasn’t the second or third either.

“I want to listen to my music,” he said dismissively, putting his headphones back on.

I went about my business for the rest of the day, and the next day we played together like we used to. The rest of middle school passed much the same, and I learned to live with it.

Christmases passed much as they had in the previous years. We still played together and were excited about everything. We still whacked our chocolate oranges together and ate them voraciously.

High school was a different matter entirely. I started a year earlier than my brother on account of him being held back a year. I met many new people, some of which I am still great friends with today. Over the course of the year apart from one another, the differences between us grew.

When he arrived at my high school, he began to hang out with different people in the mornings before the bell rang. It made sense. We were in separate grades after all, and our peer groups weren’t the same. Still, it felt strange.

I would go to my friends' houses and hang out with them without my brother. He would do the same with his friends. I didn’t mind any of my brother’s friends. For the most part they were all good people. That is, all save for one.

The one thing we did have in common was wrestling. My brother and I were on the same team and occasionally sparring partners. I enjoyed that immensely. Once more we were working towards the same goal, victory for our team.

But that only lasted for the winter months.

Over the spring break of my junior year, my brother went on a trip to a beach with the friend I didn't care for. He was gone for several days, and when he came back, he was never the same.

When I would ask him if he wanted to hang out with me after that, I would often have to shake him to get his attention, even when he wasn't wearing headphones.

A couple weeks later my parents found various tobacco products in his bag. We were sixteen, and I was angry.

My father had been a smoker for decades. He smoked cigarettes every day until the doctors told him it was killing him. My father, who in my childhood eyes was the strongest and greatest man on earth, was sick.

I was mad because my brother knew all of that. He knew it, and still he chose to smoke, dip, and chew. My best friend in the world was choosing the very thing that stole the vitality from my father's lungs.

We hoped that this was just a one-time thing, that this was just an act of teenage curiosity. It wasn't. My brother was repeatedly found with tobacco among his possessions.

He spent much of that year grounded.

The following Christmas, when I was in my senior year, I got my brother a present. It was a Betty White shirt that I found at the mall. I thought it was funny so, to make my brother laugh, I sent him on a hunt for it with a series of riddles. When he found it, he tore into the wrapping only to discover that the box underneath had been duct taped shut.

I giggled as my brother took keys from his pocket and cut a hole through the box. He ripped through it to find another wrapped box within, and I couldn't stop myself from cackling as my mother and father also started laughing.

My brother let out a giggle, and my heart was full. After two more boxes he finally made it to that dumb shirt that said, "Nobody messes with Betty F#####g White!"

That evening I hung out with my brother. I ate my orange in a separate room, but I had a blast all the same. I had gotten to play with my best friend.

Towards the end of the school year and all through the summer I worked my first job at a grocery store. I started as a courtesy clerk. My job was to bag groceries, collect carts, and keep the store clean. I was proud of that job.

I remember my dad laughing when I complained about how much of my first paycheck was missing.

"That's taxes buddy," he said, still laughing. "Get used to it, that's how it'll be for the rest of your life."

A month in, my boss promoted me to a cashier, and I was absolutely elated. My first promotion ever! I was eighteen, making money, and about to go to college.

For the rest of the summer, I did whatever my boss needed, and before long I submitted my first two-week notice.

I felt bad because I had never quit a job before, but that negative feeling was short-lived. I was going to college! I was going to be a teacher, and I relished the thought.

Those first few weeks at college felt like magic. I felt like I was living inside of the world of Harry Potter. I had a dorm, I was making friends, and I was learning so much!

Then I got a call from my mother. My brother had shoplifted a bottle of wine from the grocery store where I had worked.

Soon enough I found myself beside my mother in a courtroom waiting for my brother to have his case heard. I had only ever been in a courtroom twice before.

The most recent time was when a judge stood before me and several other sixteen-year-olds and told us what an awesome responsibility it was to have a driver's license. Before that, my brother and I were six, and our parents were adopting us.

When my brother pleaded guilty, and the judge sentenced my brother to a night in jail, my mother cried. The judge called out for silence and warned that my mother would be punished if she didn't pull it together.

Outside the courtroom my former boss walked up to me to shake my hand. He apologized for what had happened, said how sorry he was for the circumstances, and asked if my mother and I were okay.

When he got out of jail, my brother continued drinking. Then, he started doing drugs. He was still in high school.

He began to slip more and more. Eventually he was expelled, but he was allowed to graduate on time with his classmates after taking classes at an alternative school.

After his graduation he went to community college for a time, and then to truck driving school. The whole while his drinking and drug problem grew into full blown addiction.

When he chose to start going to Alcoholics Anonymous, I was very proud of him. The strength it took for him to admit he had a problem and then do something about it was inspiring. When I came home for break, I was more than happy to drive him to meetings. I wanted him to get better. And, perhaps selfishly, I wanted my best friend back.

He kept going to meetings and even managed to earn a couple of sobriety chips.

Then came the Christmas of my junior year of college.

He had relapsed months prior, and he wasn't doing well.

My parents tried their best to keep him on track. They offered him everything he needed to stay afloat. But, try as they might, it was never enough. It was as if my brother could not help but self-destruct.

When Christmas came, he seemed normal for a change. We exchanged and opened gifts as we had over a dozen times. We listened to Christmas music and ate wonderful food together as a family.

That evening was far from normal. My brother began to act out of sorts, and he went to his room. My mother went up after him moments later to check on him while my father and I spent time together on the middle floor.

Whack!

Something had fallen upstairs, and the sound was soon followed by the wailing of my mother. My mind raced to the unthinkable.

Had my brother dropped dead above my head?

My father and I raced upstairs to see my mother in tears and my brother throwing various possessions into a bag.

I saw lights flash along the street through the window as a car came to a stop in front of our house. My brother went downstairs, out the front door, and into the passenger seat of that car.

My brother was gone. He was gone and he hadn't even said goodbye.

I didn't eat my chocolate orange that night. I didn't eat it the next night either. The magic was gone.

In the weeks and months that followed, when I was home for a break, I kept making the mistake of setting the dinner table for four. It had always been four.

Over the years, my brother traveled from state to state, even returning home for a brief period. I got bits and pieces of his life from my parents and when he would occasionally call me. I did not make much of an effort to contact him after he left. The memory of the innocent boy my brother had been and the man he had become was too painful.

I would see him in arrest reports, his face bruised and bloodied. I would hear my parents telling me how he had done this or that, and my heart wept for him. I never stopped wanting him to get better. I wanted the world for him, but he didn't want it for himself.

When I heard that he had fathered a daughter, I didn't know what to make of it. My brother was not mentally sound enough to be a father. We were taken away from our biological parents under very similar circumstances. My parents and I feared for the safety of my niece.

My brother put her in danger numerous times over the next few years, whether it be through drunk driving, leaving her alone, or firing a gun wildly into the night.

With each incident my parents and I held our breath.

After years of fighting for her safety, my parents won custody and our fears were finally over. She now lives in peace with my parents as their adopted child.

“Uncle K!”

My niece screams this whenever she sees me now, and I could not be happier when I lift her high up in the air and wrap her in the tightest hug.

When I’m near her, it's like I’m looking at the reincarnated innocence of my brother. She has the cutest giggle and the kindest heart. The same heart I have to believe still beats somewhere within my brother.

My mother gets her a chocolate orange every Christmas, just like she did for me and my brother. I can’t be there every year since we now live a thousand miles apart. I just know that she looks at that chocolate and smiles like my brother once did, and that is all the magic I’ll ever need in this world.

Whack!