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orange nancy

— Leona Evans

TWO EYES APPEARED out from the edge of evening's fluttering shadows. It was Nancy. In her late thirties, borderline beautiful, brown hair, blue eyes, buried in our backyard, my wife. While I often saw those loving eyes, her personalized world was the miracle of the pollutant-free 21st century, a guaranteed, One Hundred Year™, orange container. Under the law, all contaminants, dressed in orange, were buried in a quarry two hundred miles from the city. The huge hole swallowed its orange containers to a depth of five hundred feet. Instead, I thought it was fitting to bury Nancy in our backyard.

The eastern nuclear nightmare had dispersed radiation globally. It was a miracle that anyone had survived radiation-free to procreate a treasure of normal children. It seemed to be a paradoxical opposition to life to have what appeared to be cleansed children, and then, at their birth, to be given an orange container that would be guaranteed for one hundred years. After the burning, as atmosphere cast its orange haze, the contaminated dead, with their orange shrouds, were encased in orange containers.

I was unsympathetic to the contentions between the scientists and the government. As my un-stated social commentary, I purchased untainted

dirt, a few pots, and some struggling orange dinner-plate mums. Nancy would have applauded.

I loved Nancy too much to exile her to a sea of orange containers in a warehouse I could not visit. I needed to continue our chats. Our daughters, ages six and eight, needed to feel the aura of Nancy's presence. Secretly, they needed to say their "hellos" too. In the worst of times, Nancy kept us laughing. She gave us hope; she was our hope. It was fated that I bury Nancy where we could safely cherish her.

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Nancy was a jester of sorts. She had an individualized expression of seeing everything as refracted jokes. While radiation ate her from the inside out, Nancy deliberately laughed. While irrational fears fed orange containers to the gaping earth, Nancy decidedly believed. Intentionally, One Hundred Year™ orange containers were smuggled into the corners of our backyard. Nancy intoned hymns around them. As a silhouette of the Biblical Jacob's ladder, offerings of joy

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ascended Nancy's ladder. Bowing to these sacred One Hundred Year™ orange containers in an elaborate manner became a staged effect before her audience of elementals. For Nancy, the orange altars were not the hoax, but the hope.

My neighbor, to the right of our backyard, saw me burying Nancy's guaranteed One Hundred Year™ orange container. He harshly admonished me. The neighbor tried to reason with me.

I retorted, "I admit it is somewhat unconventional at this time, but it's okay. In spite of the law, these containers are guaranteed not to leak for one hundred years. You do believe the government, don't you?"

With that remark he sneered, "Government! Those containers leak. We still die. You do not have the right to shorten my life. Your dead wife and your orange container are pollutants."

My Nancy is not pollution. These safeguards for the future were defective with good intentions.

"So? We're sitting in the middle of radiation, it's a miracle that anyone or anything is alive, and you are worried about my Nancy? Is this the end of history?" I mocked.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he controlled his voice. "You must be

crazy. The law is made for a purpose. I'm sorry Nancy died. But she died from radiation poisoning and it will leak out of that government container. It is my duty to protect all of the neighbors. I sympathize with your grief. Some of us don't, but you have children to think about. I must report this breach of the law to the neighborhood council."

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A promise made good.

In my misdirection, I buried Nancy close to the surface with the idea of clearer communication between us. I did not want the sense of separation. I attached reason to my elaboration; I envisioned Nancy to be in a state of suspended animation. I over-indulged myself with feelings. The neighbors knew about my deed. Due to the obviousness of my profound grief, no one else reported me or confirmed the report.

One friend did speak up. "You show remarkably little shame in the way you've deceived us with these so-called altars and burying Nancy

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here. I know we all need to keep busy so we don't become lonely or anxious, but this is ludicrous."

I was not convinced. "I did not advertise her burial. If the government wants to investigate one orange container, let them. It is eternally right to bury her near her family. At least Nancy's reliance on survival doesn't depend upon breathing the air or eating here." With that, we nervously laughed.

Only a few months after I buried Nancy, in less than the promised one hundred years, the orange container cracked. The offensive odor was unyielding. Illusions of human perfectibility gave way to musings of how her body was encased in this compact, orange cylinder. I felt both guilty and afraid at the thought of digging her up. I discussed the matter with Nancy.

"I want you back not dead. You know what I mean... not in this condition. I miss you and can't have the real you. I don't want you to be dead. I don't want you to...smell." I paused, disbelieving that I had told her that she gave off an offensive odor. "I really believed that this container would not crack. I wanted to believe. It was so easy for you to believe in a future. God only knows why. I can't. Without you there is no future. Everything is a lie.

Why didn't you outlive me?"

In denial, more pots, dirt, and fragrant flowers were purchased. Almost frantically, I threw soil and plants into the pots. Peppermint, carnations, and orange roses were put around Nancy's niche. Haunted by the thought of Nancy exposing the weak container, I needed to purge the sacred ground. With some guilt, orange, odor-absorbing pellets were scattered around the site. I had to reclaim realism to my fabricated memorial to Nancy. The pellets needed to be replaced every few days. In the middle of the night, I dragged out the pellet-filled containers and exchanged pellets.

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In my day-to-day existence, my conversations justified holy expectations. My vocalized conversations with Nancy I now perceived as overly irrational. My mind continually looped my actions and responses until they were comfortable. Did I will Nancy, or had I dared her to crack the container? I vaguely remember taunting her.

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"Come on, Nancy! Ten to one you can't pop it." My daughters were bothered by my actions. After a family discussion, the girls declined to gather around the memorial. Nancy was exclusively mine.

The evening, dressed in a pink and lavender gown, seemed weightless. Sleep surrounded me as a TV wall screen filled with static. I was startled awake by a voice. As the orange dawn approached, Nancy's blue eyes stood out against the edge of the universe. They drew me outside.

A dramatic change had occurred. She did it! Unethically, Nancy had broken out of her guaranteed, orange, One Hundred Year™ container. In salutation, her orange-shrouded, left arm jutted out of the ground, just above the elbow. It remained recognizable. Her hand was slightly closed. On her exposed ring finger, the wedding ring caught a stolen ray of sunlight. I acquiesced to the inevitable. I carefully wrapped her hand around the base of a plant. The arrangement was delightful. I laughed. Nancy was her own tribute. I continued to replace the flowers to maintain my faith, and chose to believe that angels were poised on Nancy's ladder, sending news back and forth to the heavens.

I heard that someone, in one of the finer residential areas, buried her husband in their backyard. Purchasing my standard orange flowers and orange pellets, I sought out this kindred spirit. She was grateful, but puzzled by the gifts. I assured her that she would get an explanation on another day.

A week later, I invited the widow over to my house in order to convey all of the happenings with Nancy. Amy was horrified. I assured my new friend that seeing Nancy's arm, which was strangely mellowing more orange every day, was a comfort to me. With her final victory, Orange Nancy gave me a resolute strength to persevere.

Joining me in the garden, Amy understood. "The world is better, if I expect it to be better."

The government has tried to drain and encapsulate all our vivacity and joy of life. How could we have let this happen? Nancy's victory-in-death is her way of giving sunshine back to humanity. She was right to believe in the future and give it her joy.

Each day, Amy and I anticipate the emergence of George's arm. There is that faint, rancid, odor around his niche. Together, we wait.