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## Peeling

Jessica DiSalvatore

*John Carroll University*, [jdisalvatore20@jcu.edu](mailto:jdisalvatore20@jcu.edu)

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Peeling

By: Jess DiSalvatore

Her flip-flops smack against her soles. A hideous *crack* sounds from behind, the backdoor slapping against the white house, the same sound a heart makes when it's tired of fighting. The damp grass licks her ankles. The sun, bright. Its rays waver in the sky, slicing through the wispy purple and gray clouds that clothe the mournful horizon. A lone palm tree sits at the center of her backyard, a crowned head bent forward in the sky.

Her legs pump. Her hands are clenched around oranges, one in each hand. Her anchors. She slows.

Alison ignores the dewy grass and sits near the palm. She places one orange on the ground and rubs at the rind of the other. The earth swells and dips in front of her, a sloping hill that stops at a road, then stops at the sand that disappears into the dark blue mouth of the ocean.

Alison looks at the horizon, her eyes squinted. Her eyes are glassy and sunken too deep. The sour taste of arguing, of curse words, stings the back of her throat like the lemon juice her mother used to spoon her when she had a sore throat. Now, she stings. Her words are shoved down Alison's throat and she plays her mother's game—spewing the same hurtful words.

The orange trembles in her hands.

She sighs, nearly a sob, and rolls up her sleeves. Her fingernails sink into the orange's shell. Digs into the filmy white flesh.

Juice drips into the cuts in the L curves of her thumbs. "Shit."

A giggle.

A shiver.

"You owe me lunch."

Alison closes her eyes. Tears are threatening to spill over. She looks up and smiles, sees her little sister's plump, tan face shadowed by her curly and full brown hair. "Are you gonna just stand there and give orders, or peel?" Alison says. She places an orange on the ground next to her.

Meg settles beside her, brushing against her like a ripple against the shore. She picks at her orange until the rind loosens. They sit quiet for a few minutes, two piles of orange peels gathering between their legs, listening to the palm above them tremble. There's a salty smell in

the wind. They watch the sea ripple more and more as the sun continues to crouch, and gray clouds gather above.

Meg breaks the silence. “Mom did that, didn’t she?”

Alison almost chokes on the orange slice in her mouth. “What do you mean?”

“These.” Meg’s hand hovers over Alison’s scarred, cut up hands, almost touching. There are tears in her voice.

Alison swallows. Picks at the zest underneath her fingernails. “Most of them.” Her quiet voice is nearly carried by the coming wind, almost not heavy enough to settle in her sister’s ears.

“And the other ones? Up your sleeve.”

Alison forces herself to look at Meg. Her sea blue eyes are full of salt and brine. Thunder rumbles. The palm thrashes above them. “Since you’ve been gone, things have been... bad,” Alison says.

The palm continues to thrash. Among its noise a door slams. A woman shouting, “*Alison.*”

Meg sighs. “Really bad?”

“Yeah.” The tears fall, and Alison feels a few drops on her head. “I’m worried about her,” Alison sobs.

“You have to stop hiding, though,” Meg says. “It’s always hot out.”

“Yes it’s hot out, it’s Florida! I hate wearing these Goddamn sleeves. I can’t have Mom see and I can’t have my friends see.” Alison pulls the gray sweater over her elbows, exposing red rivulets that slice across her forearms.

“Why’d you have to go?” Alison shouts at Meg, and throws her orange over the hill. She looks back at Meg.

Her hair is all but gone. In dark greenish-black knots.

Her lips are blue, her skin a greenish white. There’s seaweed dripping from her arms. Her eyes are almost blackened.

And then, the voice. The source of her nightmares. A gurgled, “Ally.”

Heart pounding, Alison puts her head between her knees. When she looks up, Meg is gone.

She heaves a sob, grabs the other unpeeled orange, and stands and throws it. The circle clashes with the gray clouds, then sails down the hill, out of sight. She cries out, “Where are you?”

She sobs into her hands. The grass begins to swell with rain beneath her. She hears her name again. Then the voice is close.

“Alison, honey.”

She feels strong arms wrap around her shoulders. They don’t feel real. Smoke and lemon overpowers the orange scent of her hands as Alison sobs into her mother’s shoulder.

“She was just here,” she moans.

“You need to come inside.”

“It hurts so much. Where is she?”

“Ally, please,” a hoarseness in her mother’s voice. “Let’s go. I’m sorry.”

They stand and Ally leans on her mother as they walk to the house, leaving a single small pile of rinds in the grass beneath the palm tree.

They reach their house. The rain falls in torrents.

The ocean moves, ripples, changes with every passing wave. The sun has sunk, the palm keeps thrashing in the wind. And the ocean laps at the shore, scrounging for food, its fingers grabbing at the sand. And somewhere in its belly, the body of a young girl. Soon to be pushed back to shore when the ocean is satisfied.