

ORANGE CRUSH



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# LegumeMan Books



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## About the author

Michael Dhillon's short stories have been published in the UK and North America. His debut novel - *The Cuckoo Parchment and the Dyke* - was published in 2009. He lives and works in London, UK.

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The one thing my Grandpa told me that has always lodged in my brain is that a story's not a story unless related in its entirety. There's no point telling *this* if you don't tell *that*, and there's no point making folk laugh if the point of your tale is to make them cry. It's like if you pick an orange, peel it and discover there's nothing inside - is it an orange? There's a point to *all* I'm telling. It's part of a whole. My not listening to all that Grandpa told me is why I'm *here*. But what's more interesting is *how* I got to be here.

I had been invited to make use of my old roommate's apartment while he was away. He mailed a set of keys that landed on the doormat thirty minutes before I needed them: when I absconded from where I'd been living, owing two months rent. That was the way I lived: three months here and four months there: on schedule with payment for the first couple, then no more.

I'd known him half my life. Roommates at college we'd shared courses, coffee cups and, occasionally, girls. Since then he'd moved on while I'd... I preferred to describe it as definite and determined drift; he termed it stagnation. I'd accuse him of being the same as his father, whom he'd once categorised as a materialist-fascist. But *he* was right. He lived on the top floor of an imposing six-storey house in a once majestic, but now blighted, district. An area with a peculiar demographic of recently divorced males, ageing bachelors and those who still lived with their mothers. My old roommate was none of these, so I guess he'd settled there because it was cheap. The building he lived in was otherwise deserted and my old roommate hadn't received a water or electricity bill since moving in. The authorities probably weren't aware of his presence and the landlord couldn't have cared if his equally careless tenant ended up beneath a pile of rubble, so long as he got his couple of hundred a month.

If you're wondering, I didn't make a regular living like him. He collected a monthly pay cheque, health insurance and performance-related bonus. What he did with his money was a mystery. He said he was saving, but never admitted for what. It's probably still in an account collecting interest. I survived as I had since graduating: scraping together sufficient to keep a roof over my head and my belly from rumbling by cutting small dope deals in coffee shops and bars, home-sitting for paranoid types while they were on vacation, and stints of lazy gas-pumping at dusty

road-side stations in neighbouring states. I cared only to save sufficient to get a room in town - a place of two million people and large enough for me to live as I chose without having to keep a perpetually grounded profile. Every once in a while I underestimated the determination of an aggrieved flatmate, landlord or apartment owner to reclaim what I'd taken - be it free accommodation or an antique dresser - and I'd be forced to leave. Then I'd return to my roots in Eden, a place of three hundred souls, where an aunt or uncle would let me sleep on their veranda, sit at their table, and talk with them deep into the night. But I could only stay a couple of weeks before my feet began twitching, my nose became irritable, and I knew it was time to jump on a bus and roll back to the place I knew best.

Until his keys fell on the doormat it looked like I would be taking a trip back to Eden. Getting there wouldn't have been pleasant. I lacked sufficient coins to buy a candy bar and didn't fancy the prospect of hitching with an angry wind blowing from a slate sky. Yet my skin was spared the chilling when that envelope arrived, and a half hour later I was swinging my bag onto my shoulder, being quieter than a mouse, I crept from my home of the last four months and stepped into the first day of winter. Things didn't proceed as planned.

I hadn't reached the end of the street before a hollering and moaning reached my ears. Casting a backwards glance I saw Rufus - my so lately live-in landlord - with shaving soap across his jaw

and fury in his face, flapping down the centre of the street with a shotgun in his hand. I wasn't the type who normally subscribed to participation in physical exertion, preferring the philosophy that one should walk rather than run and sit rather than stand, but this was a special occasion made all the more so by the bullet that simultaneously whistled past my ear and loosened my behind. Despite a predilection towards the sedentary, in my youth I'd been a fair candidate at the quarter-mile. So sprint I did, careless of the spectacle presented to the people I knocked from the sidewalk. Those poor souls – pacing to desk-tied living death – saved me from a lead-lozenge. Rufus was happy to go to the chair for nailing my behind but not that of an innocent bystander.

Things hadn't improved markedly by the time I put a couple of miles between Rufus and myself. My nerves were shredded and it demanded three pipes to calm me. I'd been depending upon selling that dope later in the day to keep my belly from rumbling, so my long-term plans were starting to tumble about my ears. But I struggled to keep my senses and having got my bearings was soon safely locked inside my old roommate's apartment. With the curtains drawn and the stem of my favourite pipe lodged between my teeth, my heart rate slowed sufficiently for me to recline upon the sofa and appraise the situation. Things were finally improving.

Grandpa had always warned that life was best kept simple.

'Remember these three things,' he told me. 'Nothing lasts forever. Nothing's ever finished. Nothing's perfect. But that's no excuse for not trying to make it so.'

At that moment – upon my old roommate's sofa – I believed I knew what Grandpa had meant: if you wanted anything in life, even if that was peace and quiet, you needed patience and commitment. Grandpa knew better than most that life was hard even to those prepared to sacrifice the most. He committed body and soul to his orange plantation – four hundred hectares of Valencias – and loved those trees as much as he loved Grandma and me, his only grandchild. He called those orange trees his children, and every evening, no matter the weather, he climbed into the branches of his favourite tree and contemplated his enormous family. Even when the crop was poor, and he and Grandma knew times were going to be hard, he never spoke badly of the trees. He only murmured that his children were tired and needed rest. I was eighteen when he died, happily nestled in the arms of his favourite, the sun slipping beneath the horizon. It was how he wanted to go but it proved hellishly difficult getting him down.

Within weeks Grandma was gone, too. Not dead, just gone. She'd never liked oranges but loved Grandpa too deeply to break his heart by revealing her secret. But when Grandpa died she decided to try something new. The letter she left didn't say what or where; only that she'd never been fond of my ways, being too similar to those of my mother before she

caused hell by having me and was condemned to it a short time later for killing herself. She apologised for having persuaded Grandpa that placing me in a foster home was in my best interests. It was a real shame I never saw her again because she made the best apple pie.

If a gun's fired in your direction being on your lonesome is mightily inviting, so I settled into my old roommate's apartment looking forward to a pleasant span of solitude. I knew my outlook on life would improve with a rich sleep.

My old roommate was a standard kind of guy. He dressed with a sharp side parting, preferred egg-white omelettes, and drank light beer. He always ate pasta on Monday, laundered his modest wardrobe on Wednesday, and shined his shoes on Sunday. The barometer of conformity rarely swung towards changeable, but he had quirks, especially where his bed was concerned.

To me a bed is only a place to rest head and limbs. Hell, the satisfying of a woman doesn't depend upon them, and I should know, conceived as I was in a bus station washroom. My parents met in the ticket queue, their destinations were a thousand miles apart and no contact details were exchanged. But that's my outlook and my old roommate saw things differently. To him a bed was an extension of his physical being

- an essence of his own existence that reflected his personality; an object of sufficient significance to be regarded as a fifth limb. My occupying his bed, under any circumstances, would have marked the end of our friendship.

Pulling back the cover to his extra limb that evening and studying the state of the linen, it was evident number five endured much at the hands of my old roommate. It would have taken a man braver, or more foolish, than I to spend any time between those sheets.

I went in search of my own bed and found a readied camping-cot in the study; blanket and sheet tucked beneath the thin mattress to keep my feet from the night chill. Much as I was grateful to see my place of rest I couldn't suppress a feeling of discomfort. Don't ask for rhyme and don't expect reason but his study had always given me the creeps. There was no sudden drop in temperature when I entered the room; there were no inexplicable noises from the walls; objects didn't pick themselves up and move elsewhere. But the evenings I'd spent there, chewing the fat and passing a bottle of rye back-and-forth, didn't sit comfortably in my memory. It was like when you walk into a busy waiting room and one guy won't quit staring at you. No matter how hard you try and ignore his attention, staring right back or pretending to read a paper, the feeling something bad is going to happen intensifies until you get up and leave. I considered moving the bed to another room but thought better. I didn't want to upset my old roommate, there

being little knowing how frequently I'd be dependent upon his future hospitality. Still, he had always looked after me and this occasion was no exception. It almost brought tears to my eyes when I saw the crate of plump oranges in the kitchen, reminding me of summers with Grandpa, and how I'd pluck a fruit from a branch, puncture the skin with my front teeth and suck as hard as my lungs permitted. The first mouthful of juice was always the sweetest, most beautiful thing I had ever tasted, until I repeated the ritual anew. That small dose of happiness performed wonders: when I slipped into bed I was free of the creeps.

Only when my head touched the pillow did I notice the stack of books, little more than twelve inches from my left ear. Stack doesn't do the thing justice. The tomes reached into the gloomy reaches far above. I had to stand on tiptoe upon the desk to reach the peak volume, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Disappointment shook my spine. What exactly had I expected? Certainly not chunks of meaningless text interspersed with unfathomable diagrams and equations. Something fell from the book: a pressed flower. The delicate purple bell attached to a slender stalk of faded green; crisp and demanding I handled it with care. I then did something I can only describe as instinctive: I raised that long dead flower to my nose and inhaled. I expected a bouquet of nature to touch my brain, just like when I was young and I would gulp down an orange and then rub my nose over my palms, consuming the fresh odour. But all I got from the dried flower was a nose of musty paper

and a pinch of dust that made my eyes water and lips burn. Nevertheless, a significant event had occurred. A switch had been flicked and something yawned into wakefulness: interest.

For more than a decade I had drifted; bored of this, dissatisfied with that, stubbornly ignoring chances rolled my way. I had determined to deny change for better or worse. I'd hopped-scotched across a city, from room to room, from ten-dollar deal to small-time hustle, hitting on girls then abandoning them before dawn, letting down friends until only one remained. I'd lost interest, not only in myself but life. Grandpa would have accused me of peeling an orange and sucking out the juice and flesh, leaving only bitter pith, the part that catches in your throat and is best discarded. My life had become the bitterest pith. That had to change and could only change by growing anew: rejuvenating the flesh and enriching it with sweet juice. Segment by segment, I had to become a juice-laden orange worthy of hanging from one of Grandpa's beloved trees.

I climbed onto the desk, stretched upwards from my tiptoes to the end of my fingers, and retrieved another book from the top of the pile, *Essay on the Principle of Population* by Thomas Malthus. Between two pages was a pressed flower, the lean pink petals entwined with slender leaves that retained a tenuous hold of the brittle stalk. I raised it to my nose and inhaled sharply, enjoying only the scent of aged paper. I laid the specimen beside its predecessor. The third book was De Quincey's *Confessions*, a bold

leather-bound edition dated 1851. Upon a page where the author recalled his vivid hallucinations rested a poppy, the faded petals of which were as delicate as ancient parchment. Again, the ageless fruit of nature was odourless but when I opened Nabakov's *Lolita* the faintest of scents could be detected from the cerise crown found within. With each subsequent title, and there were hundreds, more than was possible considering the height of the room, the scent of each flower intensified, the petals and stalks more vibrant and alive; until the final volume, Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, revealed a glittering specimen that had coloured the pages, the scent as wholesomely fresh as if picked minutes before.

Upon my old roommate's desk was now spread a thick quilt of flowers, the odour akin to a fresh-sheeted bed slept in only once: an embracing crispness combined with the subtlest of bitter twangs. Around were scattered the tomes, the tower now reduced to rubble. I fought the impulse to take hold of each flower and study it so no detail should be overlooked. My interest was of such intensity that I demanded the ability of total recall. The fragile remains were spared, however, by a greater hunger, for the content of the books themselves; Hobbes, Pliny, Descartes, Machiavelli and hundreds more, each a juice-heavy segment of interest that left me salivating. Laying flesh upon the slender volume nearest me, Ageyev's *Novel with Cocaine*, sudden tiredness leadened my eyelids, and for a second time I slid beneath the blanket, my head upon a pillow soft enough for a new

born, and gazed into the obscured heavens of the room and then I closed my eyes.

I dreamt of crushing immobility; snared beneath a mount of blackening oranges, the vicious juice chewing my flesh. Then of physical tranquillity; my veins flowing with warm honey; my heart gladdened by memories of the golden orbs hanging from the arms of Grandpa's children. Grandma played her part, handing me glasses of cool milk and generous slices of apple pie.

The dream ended; the immobility didn't. Except now it wasn't crushing, just painless. My veins could have been flowing with warm honey; they could have coursed with broken glass. I couldn't feel a thing from the tips of my toes to the area on top of my chest. The first thing I recall were pins being thrust into the soles of my feet. But I couldn't feel a thing. I had suffered a terrible misfortune. After all this time, the years considering events and their lead up, I struggle to explain what actually happened, but I'll try.

I always believed there was something strange, even sinister, about my old roommate's study. How else would you explain events? My old roommate has always insisted that he left the camping bed prepared in the lounge. He steadfastly rejects my claim of a floor-to-ceiling pile of books; had never heard of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* and, whilst aware of Malthus hadn't read, and most certainly didn't possess, *Essay on the Principle of Population*. He admitted studying De Quincey's *Confessions* at college and owned a copy, but a cheap-paperback edition, not

the weighty leather-bound version I described. He similarly denied ownership of the hundreds of other works I recalled handling when dismantling the tower. The fire crew who saved me were equally assured there hadn't been a book in sight. And the specimens contained within each book? Again, there was not a trace. For weeks I was convinced the denial of my old roommate and the hospital staff was a cruel joke. They warned my obsession would hinder recovery, but that didn't prevent conspiracy theories warping my mind. When the doctors tired of my hysterics they medicated me into silence. I believed the official investigation would substantiate my claims, but only evidence-based realities counted. The truth was that during the course of that night a large section of the building's roof collapsed upon me; considering the building's condition it had only been a matter of time before it fell apart.

Before you enquire, I haven't laid here and become bitter pith. That would have been easy, and in the eyes of some people excusable, but something happened that night to change me. Losing the use of my limbs wasn't the trigger; it was the tower of books and flowers within.

When my old roommate visits the care home, on the third Sunday of each month, we conduct an appraisal of events that night. We share an unspoken agreement that he will never believe my tale, but at some point he'll enquire if I'm still playing the scratched record and we'll chew the fat about the bed, books and flowers. We're closer than before, and

sometimes I'll afford an inward smile as he complains about work, interest rates and any number of other things. My bedside has become a refuge for when things get tough and he needs reminding of his good fortune. To this day, before going to bed, my old roommate kneels and thanks his guardian angel.

Admittedly, it would have been nice to see things evolve with a fully functioning body, but there's no point wasting time on things I can't change. I've spent my time being interested: lining my room with books read and appreciated, identifying flowers I remember handling, engaging with people the best I can in the place I call home. I've filled myself with the sweetest juice and most succulent flesh, making myself worthy of being one of Grandpa's children. That's what Grandpa claimed made the perfect orange. Whether I've succeeded, I'll have to wait and see. But at some point I'll meet Grandpa again, and it'll be for him to decide.