

Tea and Oranges

by Elizabeth Genovise / from Where There Are Two or More Stories

After my divorce, I started going to the Kroger a lot. I was on staff at the Methodist hospital in West Knoxville, working eighty hours a week, and I got into the habit of stopping at the Kroger every morning around ten A.M., when I had twenty minutes or so to myself. I was conscious of seeming pathetic, so I made it clear that I was there to buy my lunch, and always picked up a ready-made sandwich or a box of chicken that could pass for such. I did need to pick up food, but the truth was that I just liked it in that store. The building itself was set on a hill, high enough that you could see the great blue wave of the Smoky Mountains in the distance, and the store was like a little beacon up there, its warm lights pulsing behind clean windows.

I came to know the staff—one welcoming, if reticent, manager who always murmured hello from behind a heavy beard, and a little regiment of teenagers and college students who stocked the shelves and worked the registers. They seemed unusually happy in their jobs, often joking loudly over the registers and tossing mild insults at each other from across the aisles. I took an interest in their dramas and in their endeavors; when I had the time, I liked to ask them about their plans. I was always in scrubs, and like my colleagues, the employees there developed the habit of calling me Dr. Mary instead of Dr. Preston, and I liked that. Maybe I just liked the noise. After several months of this, I came to recognize other customers, too—mostly elderly folks who had the whole day to themselves and just liked to shop in the morning when it was quiet.

The customer I saw most often, and who interested me the most, was an old woman who went by Mrs. Hansard, though I had never observed a wedding ring, or a tan line, on her finger. She was small, not even 5'2, and had faintly curly hair that fell in white wisps around her head. She wore silver-framed glasses and was fond of thick cardigans in all weather. We were both sorting through a rack of discounted produce when she told me her name. I noticed that she wore a cheap plastic name tag that read, "Irene," and I assumed she worked a retail position somewhere, which upset me because she had to have been at least seventy years old. Since she introduced herself as Mrs. Hansard, though, that is what I called her whenever we saw each other.

"Do you work in town?" I once asked her as together we questioned a package of wheat-free brownies.

"At the J.C. Penney," she said. "These have as much sugar as any other brownie. Oh, I don't need them anyway. What do I need sweets for?"

The more I saw her, the more I thought about her. First it was her name that troubled me. I had always thought of Irene as a strong, Irish name, one with an almost belligerent ring to it. On Mrs. Hansard, though, the name was different, the syllables becoming as fragile as the clasp of an antique bracelet, two pieces held precariously together by time-worn metal. The woman herself was frail, always a little bent as if carrying a pack no one else could see. She never really smiled; her eyes were always squinting, the muscles of her face tight with some concealed tension. Even when we bantered, talking lightly about the weather and about bruised apples, her face did not relax. I pitied her wasted hands, the long roads of blue vein that led to fingers gnarled with arthritis. I got the sense that she did not take care of herself very well, and the few questions I put to her about her health and her conditions at home did not yield

the kind of answers a physician wants to hear. I was careful, though, not to harangue her about any of this, because I wanted her to be comfortable around me.

I suspected right away that she was at the Kroger every day for a reason similar to my own: she was lonely, and liked the warmth of the place. She liked the sound of the vegetables taking their showers and liked it when a stocker dropped an armful of something and cursed under his breath. Anything that sounded like another person in the house, in the next room.

More than once, I caught myself talking about her at the hospital. The nurses listened with barely-restrained impatience and my fellow physicians rubbed my shoulder, offered to buy me a drink when we were free. I was lucky; these people were more supportive than competitive, unlike any hospital staff I had ever known. But I saw that they were worried about me, and so I stopped mentioning Mrs. Hansard at work, even later on when things got strange, and there really was something to tell.

My colleagues were good to me. They seemed to have reached a consensus, on their own, that my divorce was all my husband's fault, and implied as much when the topic arose. They encouraged me to move on, to be happy to be free of it all. I listened and nodded numbly at their suggestions, never bothering to set the story straight, finding it easier to imagine their version to be the true one.

I wanted to believe them, and ignore the suspicion that soon, even the satisfaction of my job, even the mountains and the gorgeous lakes my husband and I had first moved here for, would not be enough to keep me in Tennessee. That the silence of my house would overpower all of that, and I would have to leave.

On one of my rare days off, I hunted down Mrs. Hansard at the J.C. Penney, having asked her about her shifts there. It took me awhile to find her, and when I did, she was under attack. A well-dressed woman was waving her hands around, complaining about the sales signs being false and that the dresses she was carrying were still full-price at the register, and why didn't someone like Mrs. Hansard know to change the signs? I saw behavior like this all the time at the hospital, but could excuse it given the life-and-death situations most of my patients and their families had suddenly found themselves thrown into. This woman, I could not forgive. I stood there, grimly fascinated, as she continued to berate Mrs. Hansard, who was stooped over as usual and simply nodding along with everything that was said.

It was Mrs. Hansard's acquiescence—no, something akin even to appreciation—that upset me the most, though. She seemed to be taking in the woman's words as one might take in food or drink, something necessary for survival. At one point, I heard her say, "You would be completely right to do that," and that is when I stepped in.

"I'm sorry, is there some problem here?" I asked as professionally as I could.

The woman was taken off guard. After a moment, she stepped back. "Not really," she said coolly. "I think it's been resolved."

"That's wonderful." I turned to my friend. "Mrs. Hansard, would you mind showing me the scarves? I have some questions about them."

Mrs. Hansard followed me, and when we were standing among the racks of brightly-colored scarves, she said, "Why did you do that?"

"I couldn't stand to hear her talk to you like that. Who does she think she is? You can't allow that, Mrs. Hansard. I'm sure even your supervisor would not want that."

"I don't mind it," she said simply.

I blew air through my nose. "Are you kidding me?"

"Why should they treat me any differently?"

I shook my head. "I don't understand you."

She said, "That's all right."

I bought a scarf from her, though it was only September then, and I didn't need one.

Autumn had ignited the mountains from the top down when Mrs. Hansard met Davy. I remember that the Kroger had a big display of fat pumpkins and scarecrows along its walkway, and that Mrs. Hansard's beat-up old sedan pulled up next to my car just as I was about to climb out. We walked into the store together, commenting on the enormity of some of the pumpkins, and I asked her if she would carve any this year.

"I used to love doing that," she confessed. "But I wouldn't spend money on a thing like that now."

"I guess I probably won't do one, either," I said.

Inside, we went our separate ways, and I found myself an egg and ham sandwich wrapped in foil. A few minutes later, Mrs. Hansard reappeared behind me in the checkout line, and I saw that she was struggling to carry a big bag of clementine oranges, along with a box of chamomile tea.

"Are you getting a cold, Mrs. Hansard?" I asked her, helping her set the oranges down.

"I think so."

I was happy that she was taking care of herself a little, but when I suggested some additional remedies, she waved me off.

The cashier, a young girl named Kelly I'd seen often, called another staff member over and introduced him to us. "This is Davy," she said. "He's in training."

I smiled at the young man, who took his place next to Kelly and watched her as she rang up my sandwich. He was thin and pale in his polo shirt, but good-looking in the way men were good-looking when I was twenty: thick chestnut hair, long-lashed hazel eyes, an expressive mouth. I liked him right away, and worried about the fact that his hands trembled a little, as if from too many cigarettes.

I was swiping my card when I happened to glance over at Mrs. Hansard. The look on her face stopped me; her eyes had widened, her hands frozen around her box of tea. What little color was ever in her cheeks had drained rapidly away and her cheekbones seemed sharper than ever. She looked elfin, almost other-worldly. She was staring at Davy.

"Mrs. Hansard? Are you all right?" I took the box of tea from her and set it down on the conveyor belt.

"Oh—fine. I'm fine," she said, shaking her head. She scrambled in her canvas purse, but for some reason I swept her tea and oranges over to Kelly and said, "Just put hers with mine."

"No problem," the girl said, though she was eyeing Mrs. Hansard. Davy watched Kelly, appearing to have taken no notice of Mrs. Hansard's consternation, and he waved goodbye to us as we exited the store.

"Are you sure you're all right?" I asked her on the walkway.

She met my gaze and I was amazed to see the faintest smile on her lips. She held out her plastic bag. "Here, sweetheart. You look like you could use it even more than me. Some days, you just seem so tired."

I was too surprised to do anything but accept the bag, and later, between shifts, I made a cup of the tea in the staff microwave and drank it as slowly as time would allow, wondering about it all.

A change came over Mrs. Hansard after that day. It was a new woman who came to the Kroger to pick out canned fruit and soup. She seemed to move with newfound alacrity, and to be putting on a little weight. She talked more with the staff, especially Davy, and she always went to his register when she checked out. I got in line behind her, listening to her questions, understanding her interest in this young man's life.

She asked him a great deal—what his plans were (he wanted to attend the University of Tennessee and was saving up money for it); where he'd come from (he grew up in Covington, Virginia; this information prompted Mrs. Hansard to ask him about a hidden bridge in the mountains near there, which he did indeed know about); what he liked to do for fun (road trips; he dreamed of driving to Montana one day); even what he liked to smoke (he only smoked American Spirits and he couldn't help himself, he got the habit from his dad). On one occasion, Mrs. Hansard brought a bar of expensive dark chocolate to the register along with her chicken soup, and announced that the chocolate was for Davy, since she'd seen him eating it when he was on his break. He took the bar uncertainly, offering her a slight smile, and I began to worry.

But if Davy found her attentions strange, no one else seemed to, and the others on staff warmed up to Mrs. Hansard as she became more talkative. She even began to crack the occasional joke; I heard her say to a stocker, "What did the fish say when he hit a wall? *Dam.*" I found myself laughing and realized I hadn't heard the sound of my own laughter in months.

In truth, Davy's story interested me as much as any of the others', and so I was happy to listen as Mrs. Hansard asked her questions during those few minutes she had at the checkout line each morning. His father, we learned, had some here to work for Y-12 in Oak Ridge, and did classified work for the government there. Davy had no interest in engineering or the sciences and wanted to study literature instead. I thought this was a bold choice and told him so; he looked at me with appreciation, and I wondered what his life must be like, if his father were constantly on him for his choices. I was happy to be thinking about someone other than myself, and like Mrs. Hansard, I was increasingly interested in what would become of Davy. It was like a novel or a play unspooling slowly beside us both as we carried on with our otherwise uniform lives.

It was scary, the work his father did—that much we picked up on, though Davy could tell us so little. It all frightened him and he always shook his head when he talked about it. His tobacco-stained fingers would move up to his hair and tug at it. He didn't want to live anywhere near a nuke plant, he told us.

He wanted one day to teach somewhere out West. He said the Smokies were all right but they weren't high enough for him and he liked the idea of seeing eagles. He confessed one day he didn't know how he was going to afford UT, even working two jobs. He said his father was not going to help him and that the textbooks alone would be a fortune.

Mrs. Hansard asked what classes he'd be starting out with, and he squinted up at the ceiling in the same manner she herself often did when I asked her a question. "Biology, English, algebra, and probably sociology to start," he said. Mrs. Hansard appeared to make a mental note of this, listening intently as he listed off the courses, and then she waved her gentle goodbye and left the store. That day, as on many other occasions, we saw him come out for a cigarette break as we were leaving, and waved to him. He didn't wave back, but I thought he hadn't seen us.

Mrs. Hansard came out of the padded box she seemed to have inhabited when I first met her. Her eyes, once hooded, were quick and expressive. Once, I was there at ten o'clock, actually buying legitimate groceries, and Mrs. Hansard came up behind me in line as I finished setting out my heap of fruits and vegetables, boxes of crackers, coffee, cheeses. At the last minute, I grabbed the plastic bottle of coffee creamer I had set beside the crackers and set it on the candy shelf.

"You don't want that, ma'am?" Davy asked me. "I'll take it, here."

I handed him the creamer, and when I turned back to my groceries, Mrs. Hansard was looking at me. "Why not?" she asked me, her head cocked.

Because I was taken off guard, I answered her honestly: "I forget sometimes there's nobody in my house anymore who uses creamer." Then I bit my lip.

Davy's hands were moving fast, the register emitting its frantic beeps as he rang up my items, but Mrs. Hansard opened her face to me in a look that was profoundly understanding. She said nothing—she merely reached out and rubbed my shoulder, as my colleagues sometimes did—but from Mrs. Hansard, the gesture was worth something more, and it warmed me to my bones.

We stepped out into the autumn air and talked once again of pumpkins, recalling childhood creations like athletes remembering their best games, neither of us letting on that we hadn't made those jack-o-lanterns alone, that the crazy-eyed cats and grinning rabbits had been somebody else's idea. We didn't mention that we hadn't been children at all, but young women partnered with young men, caught up in hilarity as the seeds spilled over our laps and the pulp went into the trash with everything else we thought we could afford to throw away.

It wasn't until late November that Mrs. Hansard asked Davy what his last name was. I was behind her in the checkout line, buying a package of energy drinks (exactly the kind of thing I tell my patients to stay away from, but I was struggling to get up most mornings) when she asked.

"Anderson," he told her after a small hesitation. Then, "Did you know the applesauce is buy one, get one free? Do you want to go grab another one?"

She didn't appear to hear him. The look on her face was like a surgeon's after an operation successfully completed: she seemed exhausted, but affirmed.

"Ma'am?" Davy prompted, leaning toward her.

"I'll get it for her," I volunteered.

She looked surprised, as if shaken from a dream. "Thank you, dear," she said to me.

I got the applesauce. When I brought it back, she reached out and swept my few items over into her pile, exactly as I had done weeks earlier.

"Just put hers with mine," she told Davy.

"Why did you want to know my name?" he asked her as he rang up the food.

I was on alert right away, watching him, but he would not look directly at Mrs. Hansard.

"Oh, just curious," she said after a pause. "You get interested in who people are when you live in a place for so long."

Davy did stop then, his hands pausing over my groceries. "You ask me a lot of questions. Any special reason?" He glanced at me, and there was something accusing in his face. For the first time, I realized he was frustrated, possibly even resentful. We'd been too immersed in his ongoing story to realize that he was as sick of talking about his life as we were of living ours.

Mrs. Hansard was flustered. "I'm sorry," she said eventually, reaching up to adjust her glasses and her hair. "I'm sorry if it bothers you."

"It's fine," Davy said with a sigh. "I just wondered." There were circles under his eyes. I wanted to tell him to go home and get some sleep, but of course I couldn't. Still, I hung back as Mrs. Hansard moved toward the exit.

"She's just curious, and lonesome," I said to Davy. "She likes to talk to everyone about their lives. That's all."

"It's just weird," he burst out, slapping down the box of cigarettes he'd just pulled from his pants pocket. "It's fucking strange. She doesn't do that to everyone else, that's bullshit. What is it about me?"

His profanity threw me a little; the words sounded all wrong in his mouth. "I don't know. But she doesn't mean any harm, I promise."

"If you say so." He turned his back on me, saw through the windows that Mrs. Hansard was still just outside, and gave a little groan. He moved toward the other exit at the far end of the store, and once he was gone, I went out to Mrs. Hansard and walked with her to her car.

"That's Davy's car," she said to me as we walked, pointing to a red sedan that wasn't in any better shape than hers. "I saw him get into it the other day. That's his."

I could have said something, warned her that Davy was starting to resent all of the attention, but I didn't. I was stung by what he had said and couldn't imagine relaying any of it to her.

I needed to do something for her. I visited her at the J.C. Penney again the next day I had off, under the guise of buying winter sweaters. I was relieved to find her alone, unbothered, and I engaged her in conversation as long as I could, hoping to shield her from other customers by keeping her preoccupied. When another saleswoman passed by, I changed to subject to clothes, and Mrs. Hansard made the shift with me as though it were perfectly natural, agreeing that three-quarter-sleeves were more flattering

but not practical for December. I ended up buying several overpriced sweaters that day, mostly so that she could take credit for the sales. I went home and fell asleep on the sweaters. I was awakened several times by the rustling of the tissue paper she'd wrapped them in, but I was grateful for the noise.

The last time I saw Mrs. Hansard at the Kroger, she was not in the checkout line, but in the parking lot, her rusted sedan parked alongside the car I now knew to be Davy's. Her trunk was open, and she was bent over it, rummaging. I thought maybe she had a flat tire and needed help, and it was terribly cold out, so I went to her. I saw quickly that she did not need my help, that she was deeply engrossed in something I could have no part in: she was taking objects out of her trunk and setting them one by one on the hood of Davy's car, arranging them with great care. She was shivering in a thin coat but did not seem to notice her own discomfort. I said nothing; I could only stand there. On the hood were framed photographs, an engagement ring tawny with age, a family Bible, and then things that were newer, recently purchased: a glossy and expensive U.S. road map; a series of collegiate textbooks, the bindings never cracked, all wearing yellow stickers proclaiming their origin at the University of Tennessee bookstore; a stack of chocolate bars tied with ribbon to a big carton of American Spirits, which would have made me laugh at any other time; and last, a thick manila envelope that bulged with what appeared to be paper. The name *David Anderson* was written in careful script across it.

I did not look up until Mrs. Hansard did, and the reason we looked up was that Davy was yelling. He was on his cigarette break, and from the doors, he was shouting at Mrs. Hansard: "What the hell are you doing? What are you doing to my car?"

I spun back toward Mrs. Hansard, terrified of what might be in her face after this outburst, but nothing had changed. She simply stood there looking at Davy and then went back to what she was doing, pulling more objects out of her trunk. Davy disappeared into the store and within ten minutes, a squad car had pulled up on the other side of Mrs. Hansard's sedan.

If Davy's shouting had not hurt Mrs. Hansard, the sudden presence of police frightened her, and she began to cry. They were two handsome young cops, probably new to the job, and her crying seemed to upset them as much as their questions had shaken her. I stepped in, explaining that I was a doctor, and held Mrs. Hansard's arm as she spoke brokenly to them through her weeping.

"Now, ma'am, it's all right, ma'am," the first cop kept saying, while the other was asking, "Can you just tell us what you're doing with all this? Can you tell us why you're harassing this young man?"

"I think she knows him," I blurted out, and at my own admission, Mrs. Hansard finally told the story, the words tumbling out of her so quickly and in such disorder that both cops stared hard into her face, struggling to keep up. What I parsed out was that she had walked out on a husband and son forty years ago and hadn't gone back, and that Davy, without doubt, was her grandson.

"The spitting image of his father," she insisted loudly at one point, though no one had expressed any doubt. "My son all over again. He is my son, all over again. I would know those eyes anywhere."

"And this?" one of the cops asked, picking up the manila folder. "This is money, ma'am. This is a lot of money. What are you doing with this?"

I saw that he was right—the envelope was straining at its seams, crammed with large bills. It dawned on me that this was no less than Mrs. Hansard's life savings.

"It's for him. I withdrew it out of the bank. It's for him to use for school. Or anything he likes." Her voice was choked with tears, but as the questioning went on, she seemed to regain her strength. Her eyes met mine more than once, wearing the same expression they had the day she saw me put the creamer back. I held her gaze as I held her hand.

Finally, one of the cops went into the store to get Davy himself. But Davy would go no further than the sidewalk, and from there, beside the officer, he shouted once more: "I don't need your money! I can take care of myself! I don't even know who you are," and then turned his back and was gone.

Eventually, the police left us. I had promised them I would help Mrs. Hansard put everything back into her trunk and then see her home. I was incredibly late for my shift but I hadn't even noticed at the time. The truth is that I did not help Mrs. Hansard move those gifts back into her trunk; I let her leave them where they were, including the manila envelope. I tried to reason with her about that, telling her that she would need that money to take care of herself. She responded, "I know that. That's why I wanted to give it to Davy," and I could find nothing else to say. The last item she placed on Davy's car was a box of tea tied to a little bag of clementines, as if to commemorate the day they met.

I never saw her at the Kroger again, or anywhere else for that matter. I don't know what became of her or how she survived, having given everything she had left to a grandchild who may or may not have one day accepted her gift. But perhaps she already had survived all she wanted to, because her face, when we said goodbye, had softened, gone halcyon with a peace I had never seen before except in a summer sky or the blue depths of a mountain lake.

Regret washes up in the human heart like wreckage on a beach. I envy Mrs. Hansard that moment of relief upon first seeing her grandson at the end of the checkout line, as she set down her tea and oranges. I envy her the neatness of finally clearing away those sands, of transposing all that grief onto a plane as literal as the hood of a car. And since I saw her do this, I too have scanned the faces of strangers, in the wards and in crowds, in checkout lines and on trains, hoping to be startled into deliverance by a face that is my own.