

ORANGE PEEL

SOPHIE LAW

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I felt hot, short breath and tickling fur as a wet nose nudged my knee. I traced the outline of the bed with my hands and fumbled for my slippers, my dressing gown, my sunglasses. Milly's wagging tail gently thumped my leg as I followed the sound of her clicking claws on the floorboards. Smells of coffee and burnt toast filled the kitchen and mingled with low, murmuring voices on the radio. It was five years since my sight started to fade and we celebrated it every year.

"Pseudoxanthoma elasticum. Also known as PXE," the doctor had explained.

He spat the "P" out like an apple pip. It's genetic. A disease that skipped and hopped down my family tree before landing on me. The stretchy tissue behind my retina would become pebbly and dimpled like the skin of an orange before cracking like a hard boiled egg. *Peau d'orange* was the medical term he used. It sounded like a delicious French dessert. I imagined my eyes as two satsumas peering at the world. I thought maybe I could peel one and eat a segment if I was ever hungry. The thought was so ridiculous that I almost snorted with laughter in front of the doctor. Then I felt sad for even finding it funny.

I first noticed it on my way home from an evening of drinking wine with a friend. The sun was setting on a summer evening and the air seemed to fizz. I glanced at the telegraph wires above my head which looked warped and bent. They pounded like a heartbeat no matter which way I twisted my head. I thought I was just drunk. The following morning, the glass on the window looked as if it was dancing like the heat that rises off a hot car. I burst into tears and buried my head on Jack's chest.

When I began to lose my sight, I was sad for a week. I lay in bed sloshing around in my thoughts which settled heavy in my mind like silt. I had gone to university, got a job, moved to London and then back again, travelled the world. I'd had boyfriends and had sex and bought nice things for my house. I had been trundling along with my life and now I was going blind. Jack let me have that one week of feeling sorry for myself and then told me: "Enough".

“You’re turning into a miserable old git,” he said, and I agreed.

I told him what a pathetic cow I was and asked how he could ever love someone who was blind. He laughed at me, and I laughed too. The next morning, Jack bought champagne, pasta, crusty bread and olives and laid on a spread.

“We’re going to make this a happy day from now on, a new chapter,” he said matter-of-factly.

We stayed up late on that balmy summer evening and smoked cigarettes, cackling like magpies.

Jack was stoic about it. He sorted everything for me; appointments, check ups, meetings with the blind organisation. We downsized to a ground-floor flat close to shops and parks and with a little garden. He wouldn’t let me lift any of our belongings, which he huffed and clunked downstairs in armfuls and piled on the pavement.

“I’m going to take care of this,” he said behind rattling cardboard boxes of crockery and saucepans. I felt like we were in a ridiculous romantic movie.

Months whirred passed and my vision faded bit by bit. My eyes were speckled with cloudy spots, like a greasy smudge left on a window. Shapes and colours blurred together. It grew worse in my left eye and so doctors gave me a patch to wear. I put it on in the bathroom mirror with Jack by my side.

“I look like a pound shop pirate,” I sighed.

Jack bought a matching one from the local fancy dress shop and put it on as a surprise. We laughed so much we cried. Reassurance washed over my body and tingled my cheeks. Two swashbucklers.

We decided to go to a restaurant, our favourite French bistro with the red and white chequered table cloths. It was the first time I tried to use my white stick and I muddled it along the pavement, clumsy and cloddish.

“I can’t do this,” I said to Jack. He took the stick without a word and folded it away in his coat, hooked his arm firmly in mine and walked me down the road.

The waitress seated us at our usual table. As I fumbled off my coat and scarf, my cutlery clattered to the floor. I reached out to grab it but my head thudded against the table of the couple next to us and it was as if the bustling restaurant fell to a hush so diners could get a look at this silly, blundering woman. I felt their blurry pink faces watching me. My cheeks were pepper hot and my throat vinegar sharp.

I searched for my dark glasses before shoving them on my face.

“Can we swap please?” I hissed at Jack through clamped teeth.

He tried to calm me down by reaching for my hand.

“Everyone is looking at me,” I said, my voice crackling with tears.

Jack got up and we switched places. We ate our rabbit stew in silence as I worked out how I was going to adapt to the world I thought I had known so well.

Doctors injected me with yellow dye that whooshed through my veins and into my eyes. It made my skin look like I had a very bad fake tan. As a last resort, they stuck a long needle into my retina and I silently screamed that I would never put myself through this again. “Enough,” I told Jack.

Then we got Milly and life made sense. Before her, I was frightened, pin-balling my way through the dark. She guided me to the shops and sat pressed to my leg while I drank my coffee. She became my eyes. When we got home, I would slip off her florescent harness and we would curl up on the sofa, a puddle of unbreakable love.

I heard Jack padding through to the kitchen.

“Happy eye day,” he said, kissing me on the head as Milly whimpered in excitement. We celebrated it every year.

Sophie Law is a journalist living and working in Glasgow.