

The Color Orange

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Winner of the 2020 Anita (Sarkees) Bahr Award.

When I moved to take off my winter coat, my orange jacket came into view. “Nice jacket,” you said. “Orange is my favorite color.”

As you said this I thought back to being in the Gilly Hicks store at the Mall of America and my mom asking me if I was sure that I wanted a jacket so bright. A zip-up hoodie was my favorite thing to wear, so much so that my mother often teased me about wearing the same thing every day. I couldn’t help this, it was comfortable, and it was my style. It still is.

I felt bad for the color orange. It didn’t get appreciated enough. Everyone talks about the way the sky turns orange when the sun sets, but they forget to think about the way everyone has plump, orange pumpkins on their front porch during the month of October, or the way you pass those bright orange traffic cones on the road during your morning commute to work.

“I’m gonna start calling you Kanaynay. That has a nice ring to it,” you told me. I don’t know where you came up with that nickname.

It was the last Christmas you spent with us, the last time I saw your face and made fun of your shaggy shoulder-length hair you always talked about donating. It would be the last time that I saw you, but I didn’t know that. You were one of the only four cousins that I had, which made our family feel closer, despite you being twenty-two and me only fourteen. And now holidays aren’t the same, and together our whole family shoulders the blame.

The orange koi fish weren’t visible in the backyard pond that last Christmas, as it was covered in a thick layer of ice. But we knew they

were still there, just like we know that you are too, still ever-present in our memories of birthday parties and holiday family gatherings.

I wonder if the orange and white and black koi fish are the last things you saw before you left. Or if you'd forgotten about them entirely in the cold of the night. I still think about you when I see them in that little figure eight shaped pond in our grandparents' backyard.

The color was the reason that I bought it. That striking brilliant orange was sure to stand out in the crowd. But as I wore my jacket at the funeral home, I wish that it didn't stand out and that the ground would open up and swallow me whole, so that I didn't have to feel like this never-ending cycle of guilt and grief knowing that I would never see you again in this lifetime.

The color orange makes me think of you now, even though it's no longer my favorite. I see you in the shiny, oval-shaped orange balloon that I release on your birthday every year. The messages I write to you on these balloons feel like the only way for you to know I still care after all these years.

I see you in the glossy, copper pennies that you leave in places you know only grandma will find them.

I see you in my orange zip-up jacket. I wore it when I won awards on the last day of school. I wore it when I painted pottery with my friends. I wore it the night I bought my first iPod. I wore it the night you died. I wore it the day after when I was too sad and too tired to go to school. I wore it when I watched my aunt crying on the ugly brown couch at the funeral home. That sweatshirt used to be my favorite, but it seemed tainted now after I basically lived in it the whole weekend after you died on that chilly Wednesday night in February. I stopped wearing it after your funeral.

I haven't worn that jacket in five years. I got rid

of it after I was tired of looking at it hanging in the back of my closet. Each time I saw it the wounds of missing you reopened like a scab that was picked at until it started bleeding. I thought it best that it gets a chance to start over, I only wish I could do the same.

I wish I could say that I kept that jacket to remember you by. Or I wish I could say that this whole thing never happened at all. But it did. And now you're gone, and I don't wear my favorite orange jacket anymore.